# ソードアート・オンライン
# マテリアル・エディション総集編

Word Gear

川原礫
ソードアート・オンライン
SWORD ART ONLINE

# 〔Sword Art Online : Material Edition〕
## The Progressers

November 2007

This was my first SAO doujinshi, but I now have absolutely no inkling of what I was trying to achieve when creating it then... When I read the afterword to search for clues, "I always said that I wanted to make a doujinshi and I finally did it." was written, so it's just like how this compilation came to be, huh. I didn't mature at all over these three years!

The content is the «1st duel between Asuna and Kirito», briefly touched on in the main series. It's set shortly before the side story available on my homepage now, "A Murder Case in The Area". Seeing how aloof Asuna is here, it's pretty amazing how much she managed to mellow out in SAO's original story.

I don't dare to touch manga with my incompetence at it.
After all, I'm still just as bad, if not worse now!

# INTRODUCTION OF SWORD ART ONLINE

November, 2012.
SAO begun operation with fifty thousand players で
devoured into the server. た。
However, what was made known to those players through
the intial tutorial was the fact that the game had been が
hacked by a single one of the developers. た。

The number of revised rules amounts to three——.
1. It is impossible to log out by one's free will.
2. When the player's HP becomes zero, their brain る
will be destroyed by intense microwaves
released by the Nerve Gear. される。
3. All players will be released when the game is cleared
by defeating the final boss monster on the に待つ
"Floating Castle Aincrad", the platform where クリアされ、
the game takes place in, holding a hundred floors.

And thus, the largest death game recorded in history has begun.

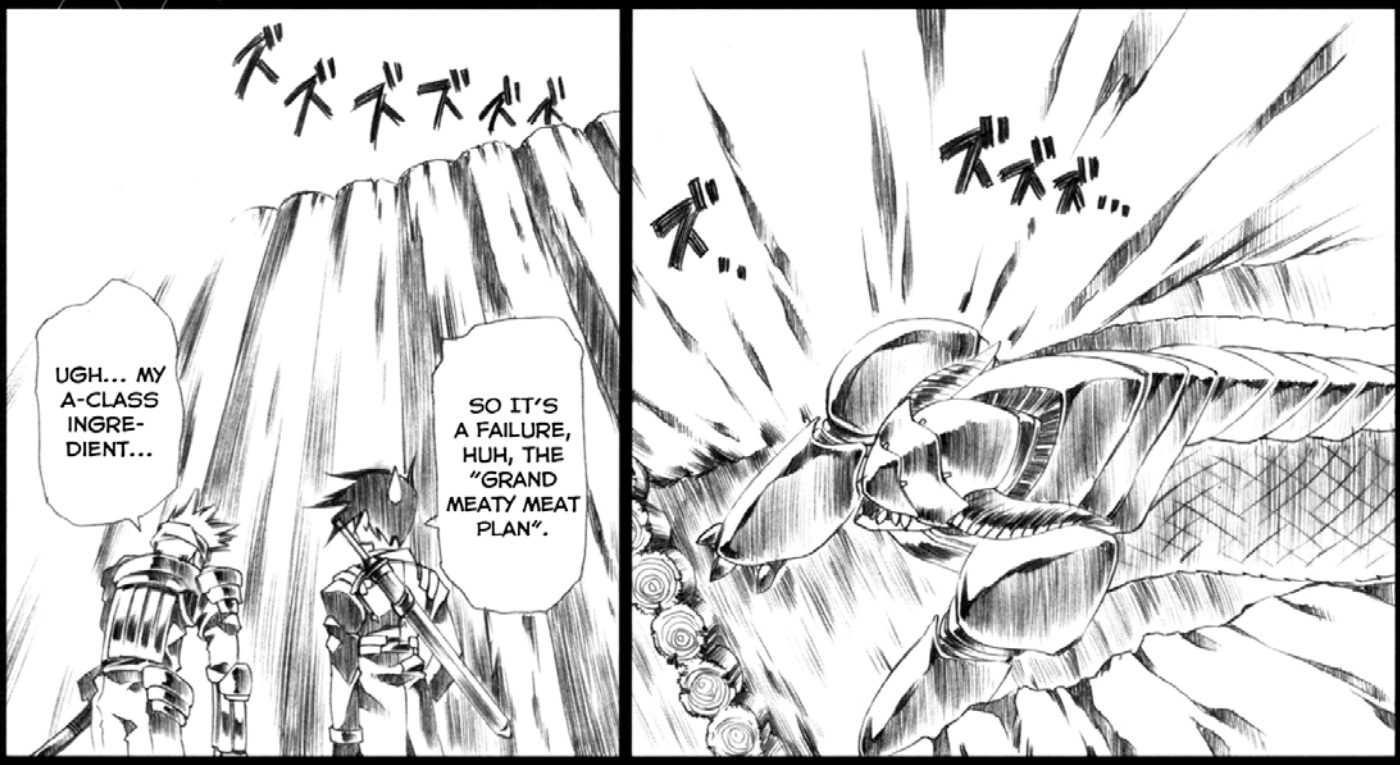
A.D. 2011——.——。
A single household game system that shattered what was common
sense at that time, was released.
The helmet-shaped machine named, "Nerve Gear", was able to fully
cancel all bodily sensations in reality by directly accessing the brain
through concentrated electromagnetic waves, while
simultaneously feeding false signals to the five senses——
In other words, a full dive (フルダイブ) into virtual spaces became a possibility.

The widely acclaimed Nerve Gear was warmly received by consumers.
A year later,
the timely announcement for the first VRMMO-RPG (仮想空間大規模ネットワーク・ロールプレイングゲーム)
was revealed.

Rejecting all traces of magical elements,
the title of the game that exclusively pursued
combat through weapons was
"Sword Art Online". ンライン』。

Sword Art Online : Extra Story
"The Progressers"
NEW
GeoCrawler
BossMonster
level..?
EEK...
GEH...
EE——
NOOOOO!

ONII-CHANS—!
QUICK, HURRY AND GET OVER HERE—!
Ruru
NPC level 1
OKAY, SHUT IT—!
NOW!




# SWORD ART ONLINE

## extra story

## [ The Progressers ]

THE FRONT-LINES—

AINCRAD 56TH FLOOR

IT WAS THOUGHT AS A PEACEFUL FLOOR WITH NOTHING NOTEWORTHY, BUT...

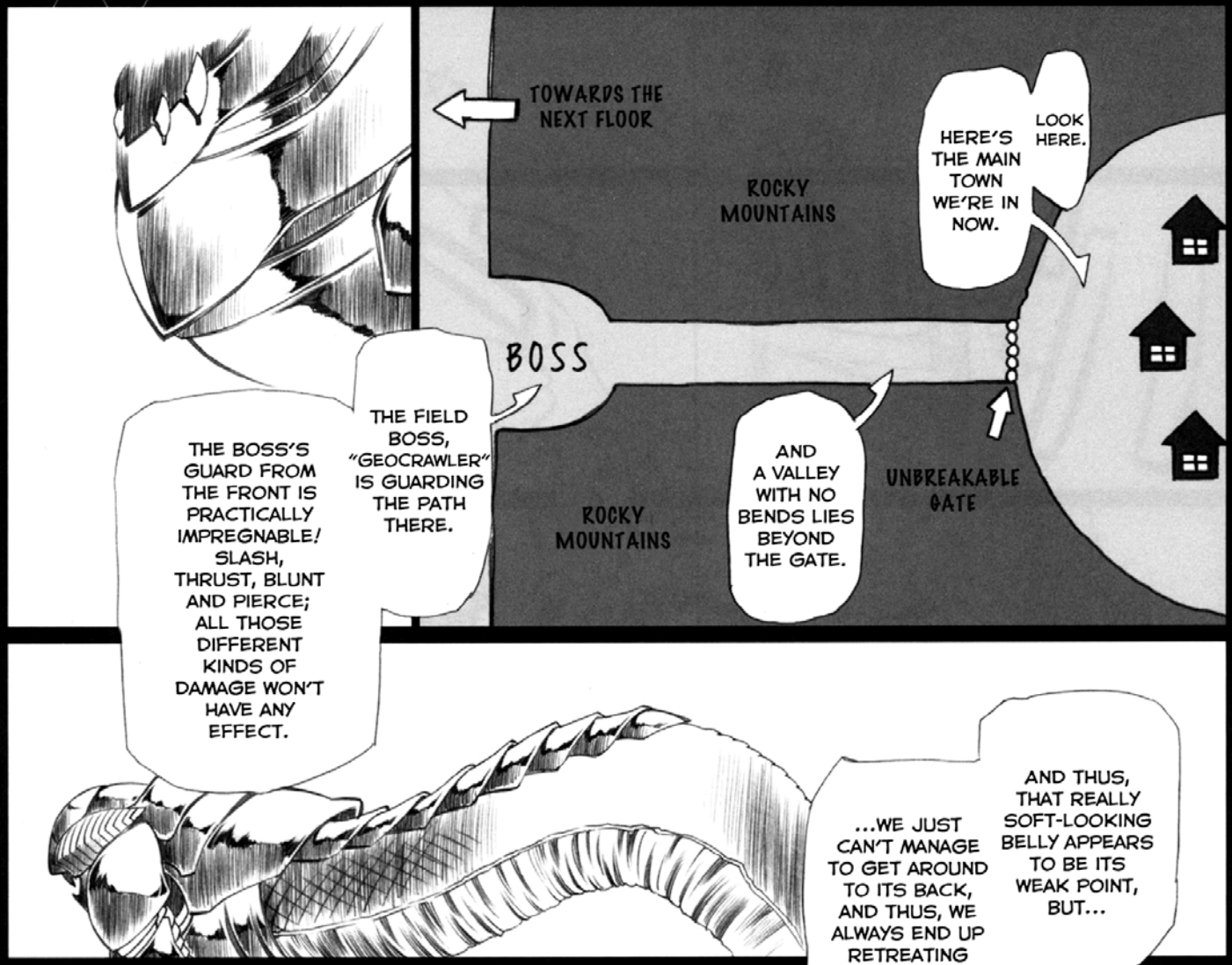
THE PLAYERS OF THE PROGRESSERS WERE UTTERLY UNABLE TO DEAL WITH THE LARGE-TYPE FIELD BOSS, AND RENDERED STUCK WITHOUT AN INCH OF PROGRESS FOR AN ENTIRE WEEK...

ズズズズ

THE TOP PART IS THE BOTTOM OF THE NEXT FLOOR (57TH). WHAT COULD BE SEEN LYING BEYOND THE VALLEY IS THE PASSAGE TO THE NEXT FLOOR. THE TOWER KNOWN AS THE LABYRINTH.

56th Floor
Boss Monster Strategy Meeting
JUST HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU INTEND TO TRY THESE RIDICULOUS PLANS!
NAH.
NONE HERE.
I REALLY HAD CONFI-DENCE IN IT THIS TIME, YOU KNOW.
Solo Player
Kirito
Leader of Guild
"Fuurinkazan"
Klein
SAVE YOUR EXCUSES! I WILL HAVE YOU...
...UNDER THE COM-MAND OF US, KoB, FOR THE NEXT PLAN AS AGREED!
Sub-leader of Guild
"Knights of Blood"
Asuna

The abbreviations of guild names are registered in the system as well. KoB is the abbreviation of Knights of Blood. Fuurinkazan has the abbreviation of WWFM as well, but no one uses it.


TOWARDS THE NEXT FLOOR
ROCKY MOUNTAINS
LOOK HERE.
HERE'S THE MAIN TOWN WE'RE IN NOW.
BOSS
THE FIELD BOSS, "GEOCRAWLER" IS GUARDING THE PATH THERE.
AND A VALLEY WITH NO BENDS LIES BEYOND THE GATE.
UNBREAKABLE GATE
ROCKY MOUNTAINS
THE BOSS'S GUARD FROM THE FRONT IS PRACTICALLY IMPREGNABLE! SLASH, THRUST, BLUNT AND PIERCE; ALL THOSE DIFFERENT KINDS OF DAMAGE WON'T HAVE ANY EFFECT.
...WE JUST CAN'T MANAGE TO GET AROUND TO ITS BACK, AND THUS, WE ALWAYS END UP RETREATING BACK TO THE GATE.
AND THUS, THAT REALLY SOFT-LOOKING BELLY APPEARS TO BE ITS WEAK POINT, BUT...
!!
WHILE THE BOSS IS KILLING OFF THE NPCS, WE'LL ATTACK FROM BEHIND AND FINISH IT OFF.
THAT'S THE POINT.
WA- WAIT, WAIT UP. IF YOU DO THAT, THE BOSS WILL GET IN THE VILLAGE AND...
BUT FOR THE NEXT PLAN, WE SHALL LEAVE THE GATE OPEN!

NEARLY ALL WEAPON SKILLS WITHIN SAO ARE SPLIT INTO THESE FOUR PROPERTIES.
THRUST BELONGS TO CLOSE-RANGED WEAPONS SUCH AS RAPIERS, WHILE PIERCE IS FOR NEAR TO FAR-RANGED WEAPONS, LIKE THROWING PICKS AND LANCES.

THAT'S CRAZY!
NPCS AREN'T JUST OBJECTS LIKE ROCKS AND TREES!
THEY ARE...
LIVING.
...OR SO YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY?
NAIVE.
THOSE ARE NOTHING MORE THAN OBJECTS.
NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES THEY'RE SLAUGHTERED, THEY WILL BE REBORN AFTER TWENTY-FOUR HOURS, AFTER ALL.
THIS IS SOMETHING I ALWAYS THOUGHT I HAD TO MENTION, BUT...
AS THE PROGRESSERS WHO STAND AT THE TOP OF ALL THE PLAYERS, THOSE PRIORITIES OF YOURS ARE MISTAKEN.
WE MUST EXTERMINATE THE BOSSES AND REACH THE NEXT FLOOR, EVEN IF IT'S ONLY A DAY, OR EVEN AN HOUR FASTER!
.....
THERE IS NOT A SINGLE THING MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT, ASIDE FROM THE LIVES OF PLAYERS!

HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!
IT MAY BE RUDE OF ME TO SAY ALL THAT, BUT I WANT TO MAKE SURE!
I DO PLAN ON THAT, HOWEVER?
I DID REACH 70 JUST YESTERDAY, AFTER ALL.
キラーン
OF COURSE, MISS SUB-LEADER HERE HAS A HIGHER LEVEL THAN THOSE OF US SCREWING AROUND THE ENTIRE TIME, YES!?
WELL, SORRY NOW! I'M STILL 67——!
……
KLEIN... YOU...
BUT!
SAD TO SAY, BUT I'M 4 BELOW THAN THIS GUY HERE!
H-HEY!
WHA...

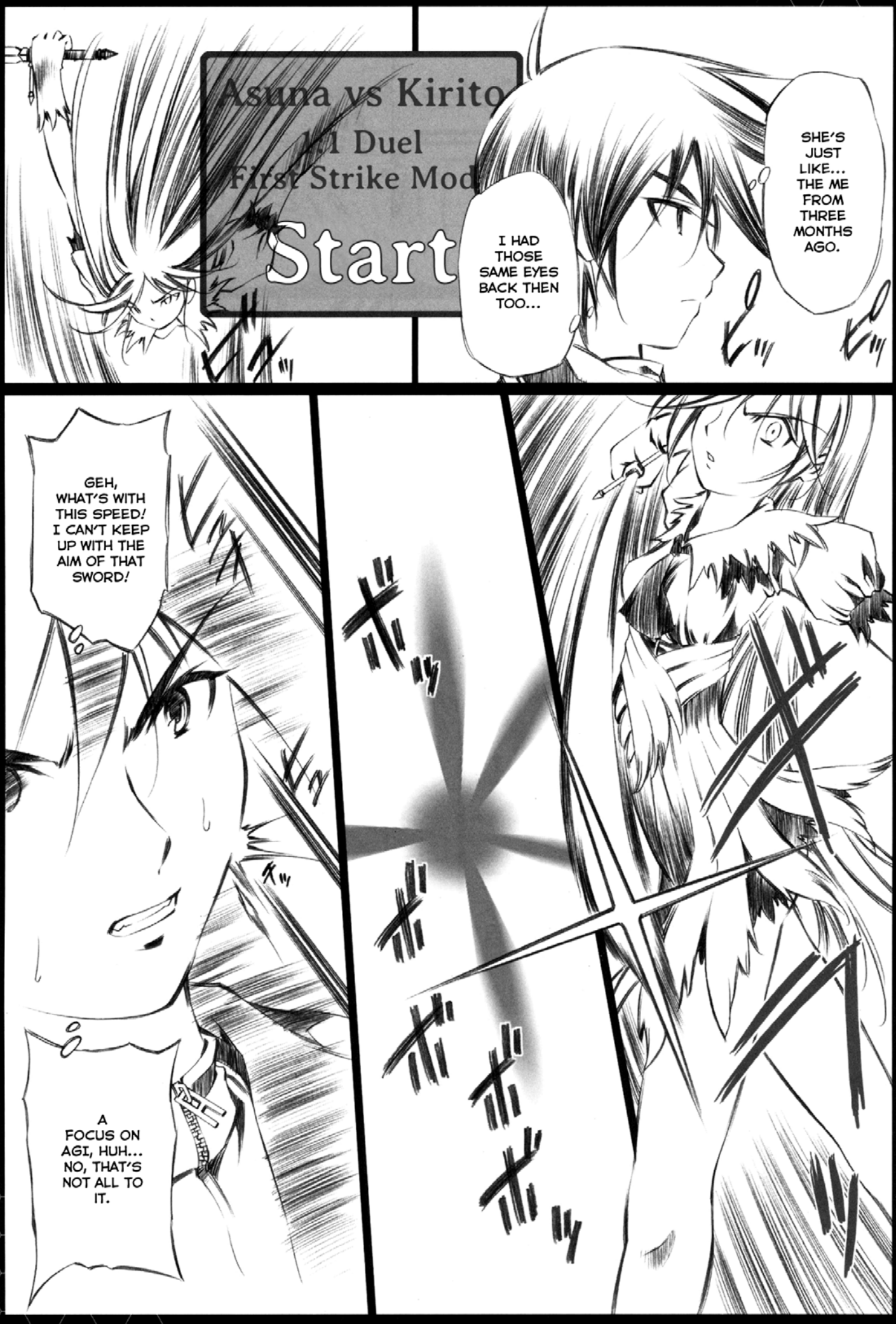
In SAO, where you mustn't get PK-ed at all costs, asking for the levels and stats of others is an ill-mannered action.

Adding 10 to the frontlines is the level used as the progressers' safety margin (thus 66 for this floor).

NO, I REALLY DON'T PLAN TO FORCE MY OPINION THROUGH THAT DIFFERENCE IN LEVELS.
JUST THAT...
IS "PROGRESSING" SIMPLY USING THE FASTEST AND MOST EFFICIENT METHOD TO DEFEAT THE BOSSES?
ABANDONING SLOW-LEVELING COMRADES, KILLING NPCS, WOULDN'T THESE MEANS CAUSE YOUR MOST IMPORTANT PARAMETER... YOUR "HEART", TO GET TAINTED?
DON'T YOU DARE... LOOK AT ME WITH THOSE PITYING EYES...!
From player Asuna
An 1 vs 1 Duel has been requested.
Will you accept?
Accept
Refuse
I'LL HAVE YOU BACK THEM UP WITH YOUR SWORD!
—THOSE WORDS!
ざわ...
WOAH, FOR REAL?
IT'S KOB'S ASUNA THE "FLASH" AND...
THE STRONGEST OF THE SOLO PLAYERS, KIRITO THE "BLACK SWORDSMAN", YOU KNOW. DAMN, THIS EVENT'S GONNA BE AMAZING.
ざわ.

THE ACTION OF OPENING THE LEFT HAND AND BRINGING IT DOWN CALLS OUT THE MAIN MENU WINDOW.
THE LOG OUT COMMAND WAS ORIGINALLY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE COMMAND LIST, BUT IT IS CURRENTLY MISSING.

Accept
AH.
WELL, I'M FINE WITH IT.
YOU SURE TOOK YOUR TIME TO THINK OF THAT...
S... SORRY, KIRITO. I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD TURN OUT LIKE THIS...
DON'T GO FOR IT, THAT'S THE SUB-LEADER OF KOB YOU'RE UP AGAINST.
Asuna vs Kirito
1:1 Duel
First Strike Mode
Starting in
14s
I MUST NOT LOSE.
THERE'S NO WAY I WILL LOSE TO SOMEONE WHO ENJOYS THIS DEATH GAME... AFTER ALL, EVEN WHILE WE'RE DOING THIS...
MY REALITY IS STILL ROTTING AWAY BIT BY BIT!


Asuna vs Kirito
1:1 Duel
First Strike Mod
Start
SHE'S JUST LIKE... THE ME FROM THREE MONTHS AGO.
I HAD THOSE SAME EYES BACK THEN TOO...
GEH, WHAT'S WITH THIS SPEED! I CAN'T KEEP UP WITH THE AIM OF THAT SWORD!
A FOCUS ON AGI, HUH... NO, THAT'S NOT ALL TO IT.

THE SKILL DELAY'S SHORT TOO.
I CAN'T CLOSE IN—
IT CAN'T BE HELPED... IT'S NOT REALLY FAIR, BUT I'LL USE THAT.
GOT HIM! I KNOW EVERY VARIATION OF THE OVERHEAD ONE-HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD SLASHES! I CAN REACT ON SIGHT, NO MATTER WHICH IT IS!
I'LL PARRY AND DEFLECT THE ATTACK, THEN LAND A WEAK HIT WHILE HE'S STUNNED!
!?
A SECOND SWORD!?
THAT'S RIDICULOUS! WHEN DID HE MANIPULATE HIS EQUIPMENT WINDOW!?

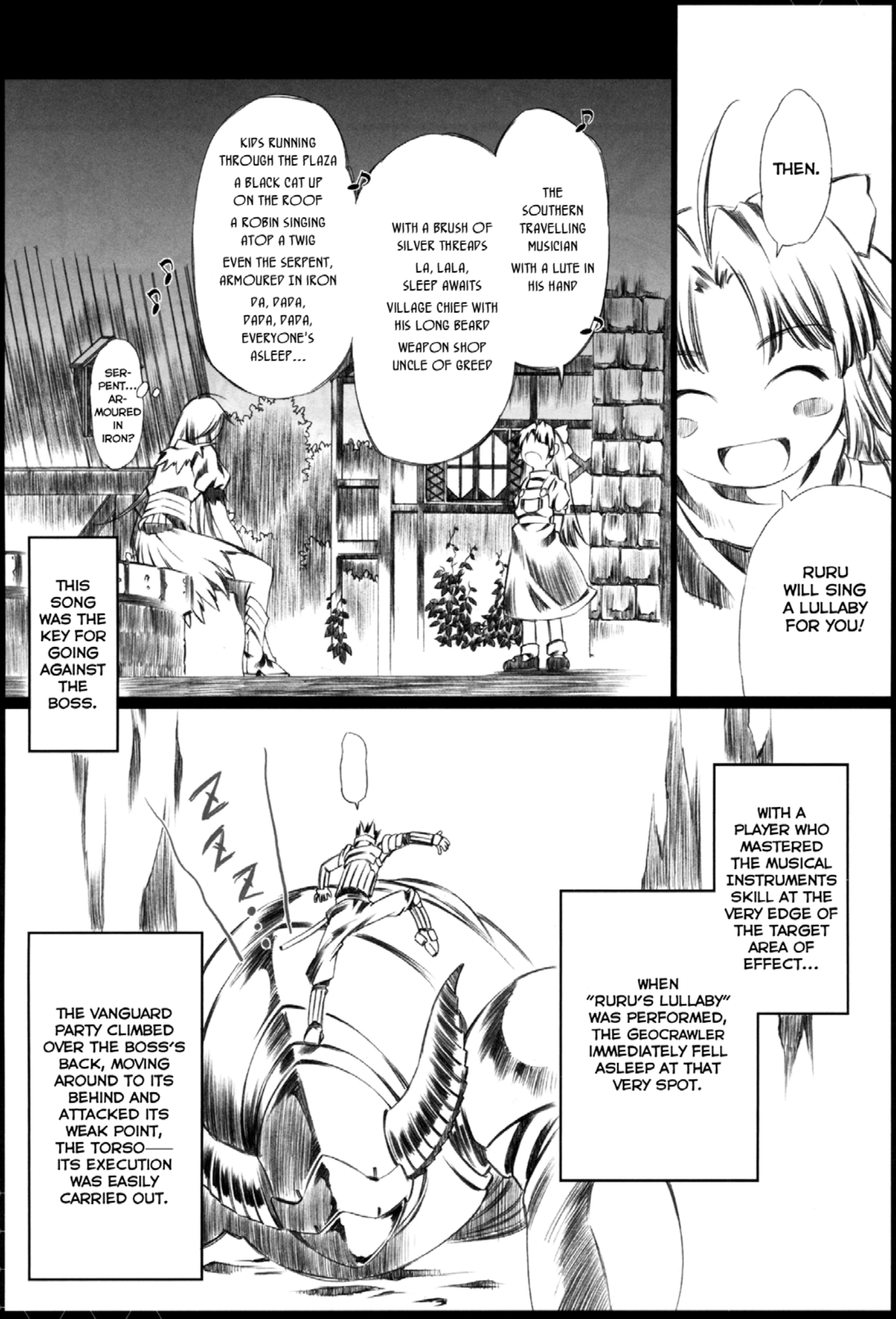
THE DAMAGE FROM EACH HIT OF CONSECUTIVE HITS SKILLS WITH SHORT DELAYS IS COMPARATIVELY LIGHT, BUT STILL SATISFIES THE REQUIRED AMOUNT NEEDED FOR THE FIRST STRIKE OF DUELS.

AS EQUIPPING WEAPONS AND ARMOUR REQUIRES THE MANIPULATION OF THE MENU AND SCREEN, IT IS RATHER DIFFICULT TO DO SO IN THE MIDST OF BATTLE.

THE RIGHT'S FIRST! I'LL PARRY BOTH SIDES IN ONE MOTION!
IT'S NOT THERE!?
THE MOTION OF DRAWING HIS SWORD INTO A SLASH WAS A FEINT!
AN EMPTY SLASH...! I CAN'T REGAIN CONTROL OF MY SWORD IN TIME WITH THIS DELAY!!
Winne
Kirito

UGH... LOSING TO A TECHNIQUE OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM LIKE THAT...
WHY COULD HE USE A COMBAT STYLE LIKE THAT...? WHY COULD HE SIMPLY... LAUGH LIKE THAT...
ONEE-CHAN... YOU CAN'T SLEEP?
Y... YES.
SO THERE WAS A CONVERSATION PATTERN LIKE THIS FOR THIS NPC, HUH... I WONDER WHAT WAS THE FLAG THAT TRIGGERED IT.

THE FLAG IS TO "STAY BY ONESELF IN COORDINATES OUTSIDE OF A HOUSE WITHIN THE VILLAGE, FOR A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF TIME, LATE AT NIGHT".

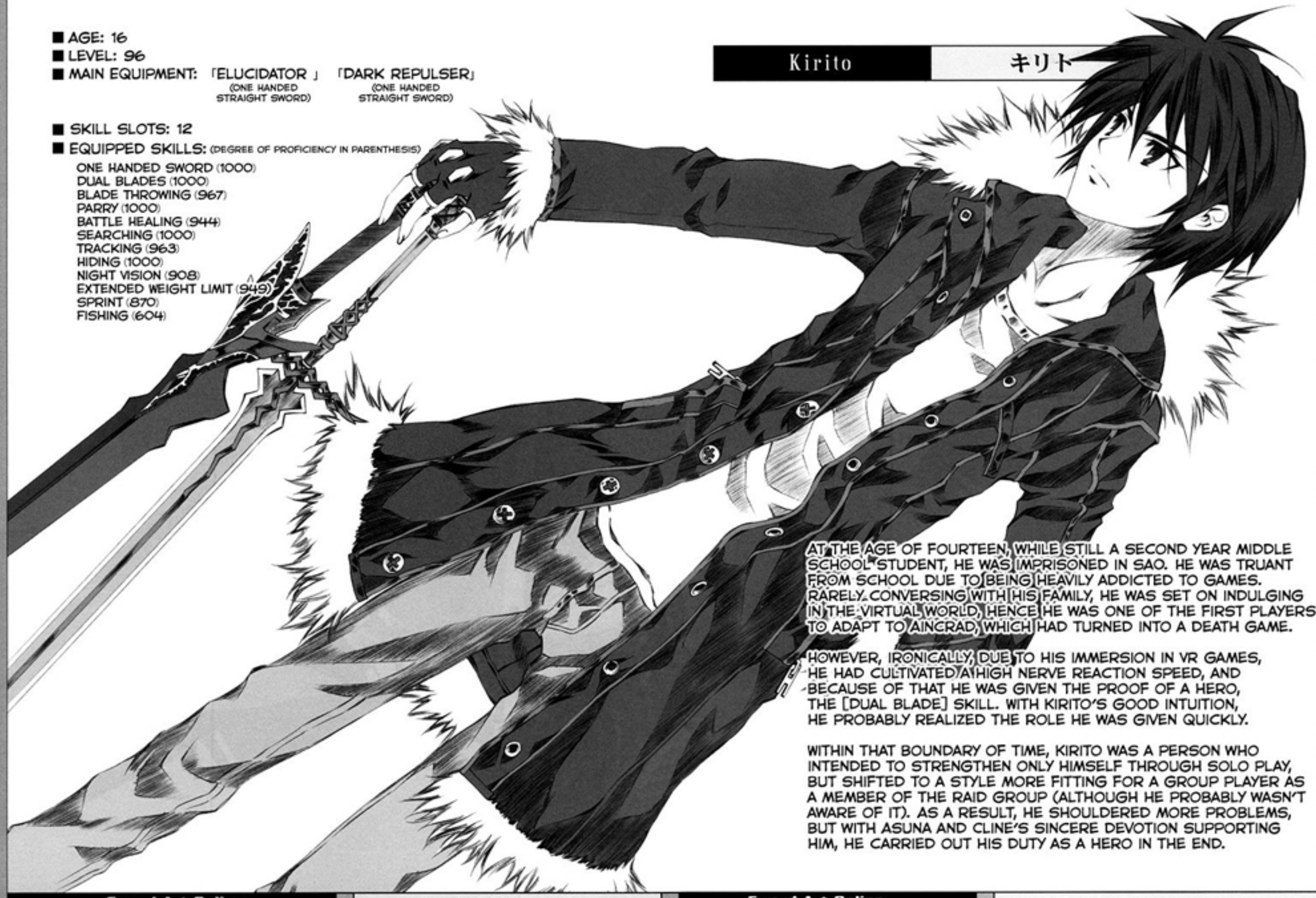

THEN.
RURU WILL SING A LULLABY FOR YOU!
KIDS RUNNING THROUGH THE PLAZA
A BLACK CAT UP ON THE ROOF
A ROBIN SINGING ATOP A TWIG
EVEN THE SERPENT, ARMOURED IN IRON
DA, DAPA, DAPA, DAPA, EVERYONE'S ASLEEP...
WITH A BRUSH OF SILVER THREADS
LA, LALA, SLEEP AWAITS
VILLAGE CHIEF WITH HIS LONG BEARD
WEAPON SHOP UNCLE OF GREED
THE SOUTHERN TRAVELLING MUSICIAN
WITH A LUTE IN HIS HAND
SER-PENT... AR-MOURED IN IRON?
THIS SONG WAS THE KEY FOR GOING AGAINST THE BOSS.
ZZZ...
WITH A PLAYER WHO MASTERED THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS SKILL AT THE VERY EDGE OF THE TARGET AREA OF EFFECT...
WHEN "RURU'S LULLABY" WAS PERFORMED, THE GEOCRAWLER IMMEDIATELY FELL ASLEEP AT THAT VERY SPOT.
THE VANGUARD PARTY CLIMBED OVER THE BOSS'S BACK, MOVING AROUND TO ITS BEHIND AND ATTACKED ITS WEAK POINT, THE TORSO—— ITS EXECUTION WAS EASILY CARRIED OUT.

56th Floor
Boss Monster Strategy ~~Meeting~~ Victory Party
AH...
I SEE...
I'M IN NO MOOD TO TAKE PART IN THE CELEBRATIONS THIS TIME ROUND...
HE'S LIVING... IN THIS WORLD.
THAT PERSON ISN'T JUST "PROGRESSING".
THE TIME THESE TWO GET MARRIED WILL BE IN APPROXIMATELY EIGHT MONTHS, A MERE TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE GAME IS CLEARED.
Warning
Inappropriate Contact Towards NPCs
END

# Kirito　キリト

■ AGE: 16
■ LEVEL: 96
■ MAIN EQUIPMENT: 「ELUCIDATOR」 (ONE HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD) 「DARK REPULSER」 (ONE HANDED STRAIGHT SWORD)
■ SKILL SLOTS: 12
■ EQUIPPED SKILLS: (DEGREE OF PROFICIENCY IN PARENTHESIS)

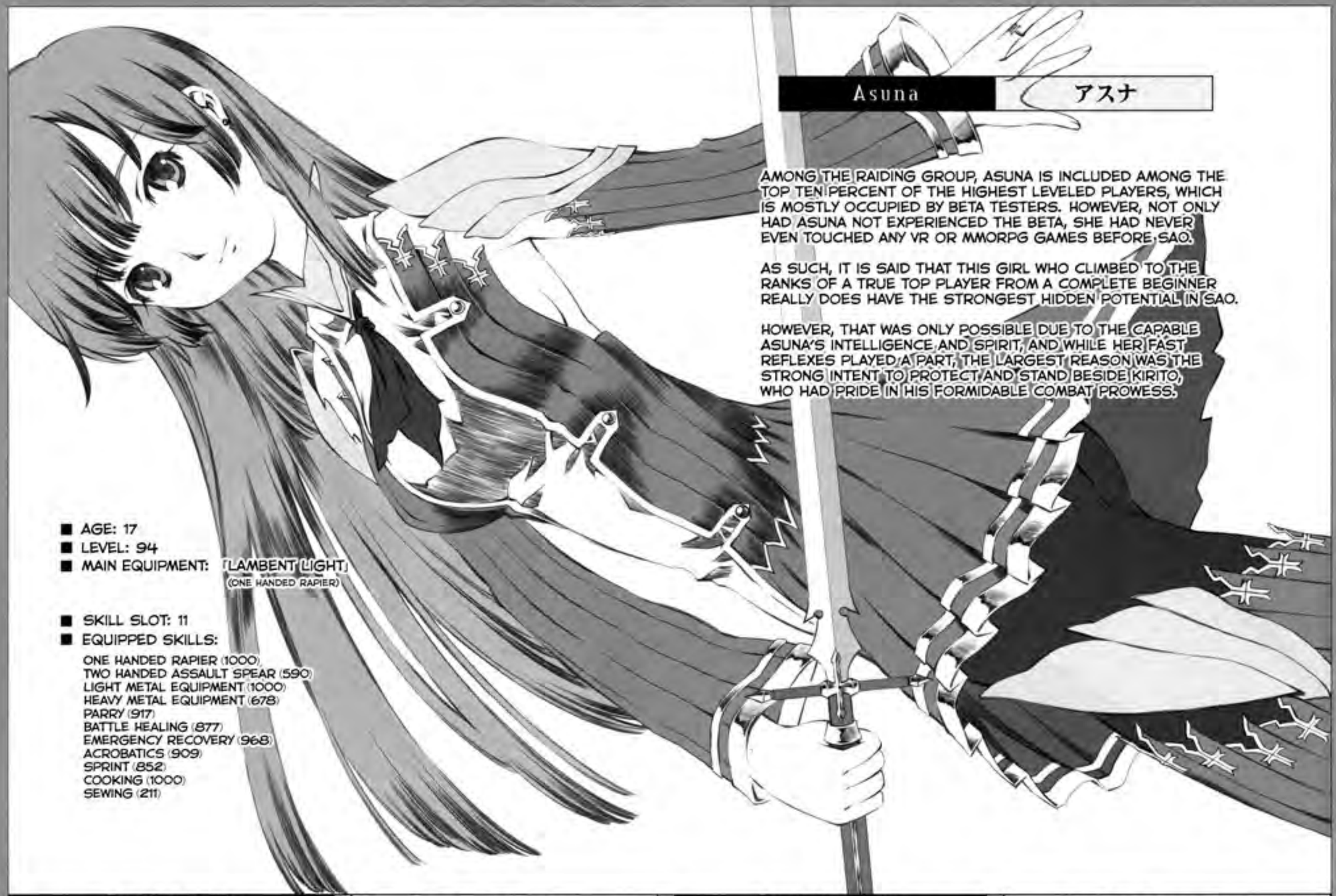
ONE HANDED SWORD (1000)
DUAL BLADES (1000)
BLADE THROWING (967)
PARRY (1000)
BATTLE HEALING (944)
SEARCHING (1000)
TRACKING (963)
HIDING (1000)
NIGHT VISION (908)
EXTENDED WEIGHT LIMIT (949)
SPRINT (870)
FISHING (604)



AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN, WHILE STILL A SECOND YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT, HE WAS IMPRISONED IN SAO. HE WAS TRUANT FROM SCHOOL DUE TO BEING HEAVILY ADDICTED TO GAMES. RARELY CONVERSING WITH HIS FAMILY, HE WAS SET ON INDULGING IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD, HENCE HE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PLAYERS TO ADAPT TO AINCRAD, WHICH HAD TURNED INTO A DEATH GAME.

HOWEVER, IRONICALLY, DUE TO HIS IMMERSION IN VR GAMES, HE HAD CULTIVATED A HIGH NERVE REACTION SPEED, AND BECAUSE OF THAT HE WAS GIVEN THE PROOF OF A HERO, THE [DUAL BLADE] SKILL. WITH KIRITO'S GOOD INTUITION, HE PROBABLY REALIZED THE ROLE HE WAS GIVEN QUICKLY.

WITHIN THAT BOUNDARY OF TIME, KIRITO WAS A PERSON WHO INTENDED TO STRENGTHEN ONLY HIMSELF THROUGH SOLO PLAY, BUT SHIFTED TO A STYLE MORE FITTING FOR A GROUP PLAYER AS A MEMBER OF THE RAID GROUP (ALTHOUGH HE PROBABLY WASN'T AWARE OF IT). AS A RESULT, HE SHOULDERED MORE PROBLEMS, BUT WITH ASUNA AND CLINE'S SINCERE DEVOTION SUPPORTING HIM, HE CARRIED OUT HIS DUTY AS A HERO IN THE END.



## Asuna　アスナ

AMONG THE RAIDING GROUP, ASUNA IS INCLUDED AMONG THE TOP TEN PERCENT OF THE HIGHEST LEVELED PLAYERS, WHICH IS MOSTLY OCCUPIED BY BETA TESTERS. HOWEVER, NOT ONLY HAD ASUNA NOT EXPERIENCED THE BETA, SHE HAD NEVER EVEN TOUCHED ANY VR OR MMORPG GAMES BEFORE SAO.

AS SUCH, IT IS SAID THAT THIS GIRL WHO CLIMBED TO THE RANKS OF A TRUE TOP PLAYER FROM A COMPLETE BEGINNER REALLY DOES HAVE THE STRONGEST HIDDEN POTENTIAL IN SAO.

HOWEVER, THAT WAS ONLY POSSIBLE DUE TO THE CAPABLE ASUNA'S INTELLIGENCE AND SPIRIT, AND WHILE HER FAST REFLEXES PLAYED A PART, THE LARGEST REASON WAS THE STRONG INTENT TO PROTECT AND STAND BESIDE KIRITO, WHO HAD PRIDE IN HIS FORMIDABLE COMBAT PROWESS.

- AGE: 17
- LEVEL: 94
- MAIN EQUIPMENT: 「LAMBENT LIGHT」 (ONE HANDED RAPIER)

- SKILL SLOT: 11
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

ONE HANDED RAPIER (1000)
TWO HANDED ASSAULT SPEAR (590)
LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (1000)
HEAVY METAL EQUIPMENT (678)
PARRY (917)
BATTLE HEALING (877)
EMERGENCY RECOVERY (968)
ACROBATICS (909)
SPRINT (852)
COOKING (1000)
SEWING (211)

# Klein　クライン

THE GUILD『FUURINKAZAN』LED BY KLEIN WAS THE CORE CLASS AMONG THE RAID GROUP, THEY CONTRIBUTED GREATLY IN THE SPOT THEY FILLED WITH THEIR CALM MOOD, WHICH HELPED RELIEVE THE SAVAGE ATMOSPHERE OF THE FRONT LINES.

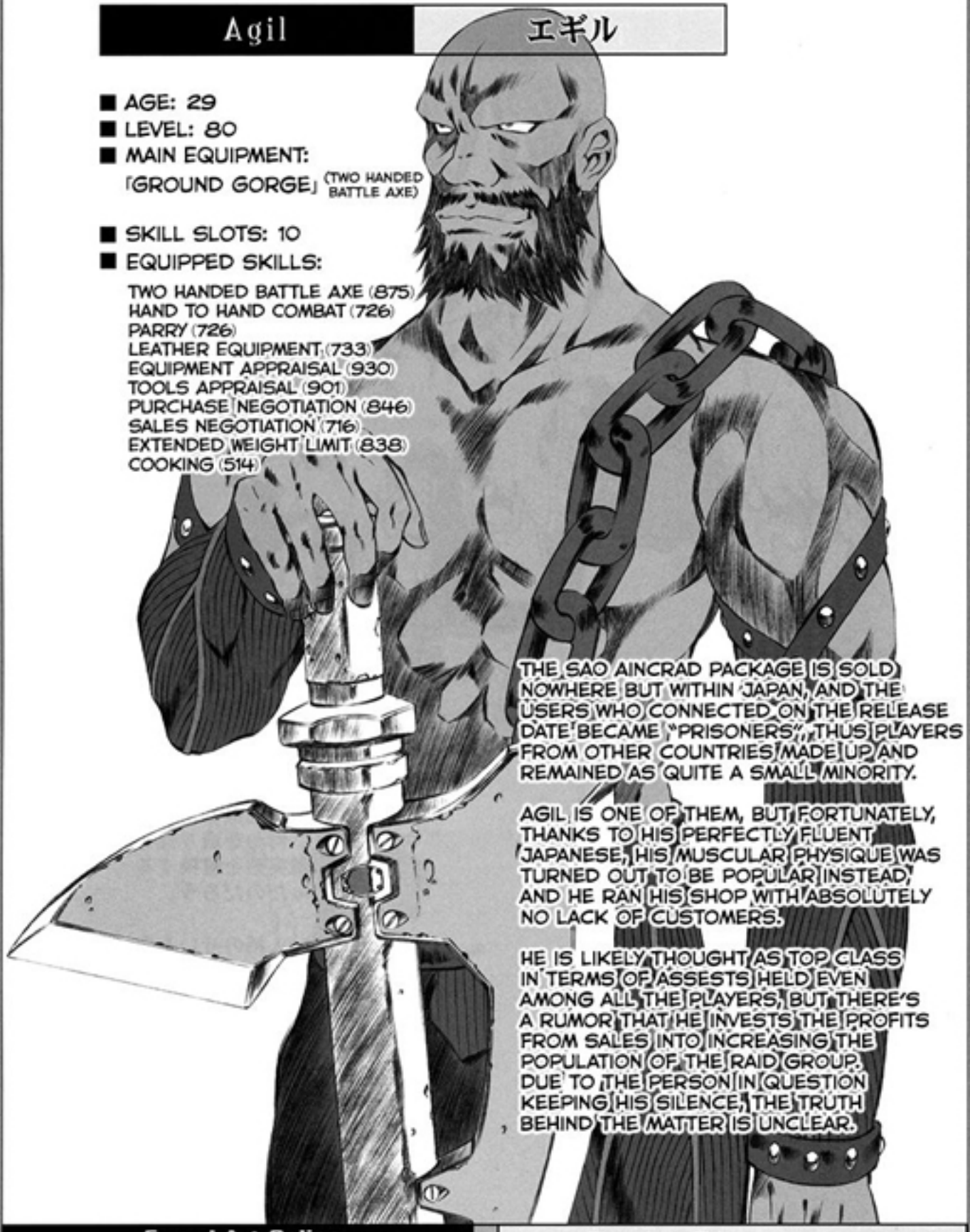
HE HAS A CAREFREE ATTITUDE, BUT IT ISN'T EASY TO SEE THROUGH THE BOTTOM OF HIS HEART. HE WAS CHARMED BY KIRITO, WHOSE COMBAT PROWESS MADE HIM STAND OUT DESPITE BEING YOUNGER, AND WAS ALWAYS THERE TO SUPPORT KIRITO'S INSECURE MENTAL STATE.

IN AN AINCRAD RAID, HE IS THE MOOD MAKER, AND IS CERTAINLY INDISPENSABLE.

- AGE: 24
- LEVEL: 88
- MAIN EQUIPMENT: 『KARAKURENAI』 (KATANA)
- SKILL SLOTS: 11
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

ONE HANDED CURVED BLADE (957)
KATANA (822)
LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (913)
LIGHT SHIELD EQUIPMENT (861)
BATTLE HEALING (562)
EMERGENCY RECOVERY (759)
SEARCHING (710)
LISTENING (594)
EXTENDED WEIGHT LIMIT (685)
FIGHTING SPIRIT (712) (HATE SKILL)
SEWING (366)

# Agil　エギル



- AGE: 29
- LEVEL: 80
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:
  「GROUND GORGE」(TWO HANDED BATTLE AXE)
- SKILL SLOTS: 10
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:

TWO HANDED BATTLE AXE (875)
HAND TO HAND COMBAT (726)
PARRY (726)
LEATHER EQUIPMENT (733)
EQUIPMENT APPRAISAL (930)
TOOLS APPRAISAL (901)
PURCHASE NEGOTIATION (846)
SALES NEGOTIATION (716)
EXTENDED WEIGHT LIMIT (838)
COOKING (514)

THE SAO AINCRAD PACKAGE IS SOLD NOWHERE BUT WITHIN JAPAN, AND THE USERS WHO CONNECTED ON THE RELEASE DATE BECAME "PRISONERS", THUS PLAYERS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES MADE UP AND REMAINED AS QUITE A SMALL MINORITY.

AGIL IS ONE OF THEM, BUT FORTUNATELY, THANKS TO HIS PERFECTLY FLUENT JAPANESE, HIS MUSCULAR PHYSIQUE WAS TURNED OUT TO BE POPULAR INSTEAD, AND HE RAN HIS SHOP WITH ABSOLUTELY NO LACK OF CUSTOMERS.

HE IS LIKELY THOUGHT AS TOP CLASS IN TERMS OF ASSESTS HELD EVEN AMONG ALL THE PLAYERS, BUT THERE'S A RUMOR THAT HE INVESTS THE PROFITS FROM SALES INTO INCREASING THE POPULATION OF THE RAID GROUP. DUE TO THE PERSON IN QUESTION KEEPING HIS SILENCE, THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MATTER IS UNCLEAR.

# Lisbeth リズベット

- AGE: 17
- LEVEL: 79
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:
  「ZORINGEN HAMMER」
  (BLACKSMITH'S METAL HAMMER)
- SKILL SLOTS: 9
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:
  ONE HANDED WAR HAMMER (615)
  LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (529)
  SLASH WEAPON FORGING (923)
  THRUST WEAPON FORGING (912)
  BLUNT WEAPON FORGING (830)
  LIGHT METAL ARMOR FORGING (846)
  HEAVY METAL ARMOR FORGING (784)
  METAL EQUIPMENT REPAIRING (909)
  METAL REFINING (877)

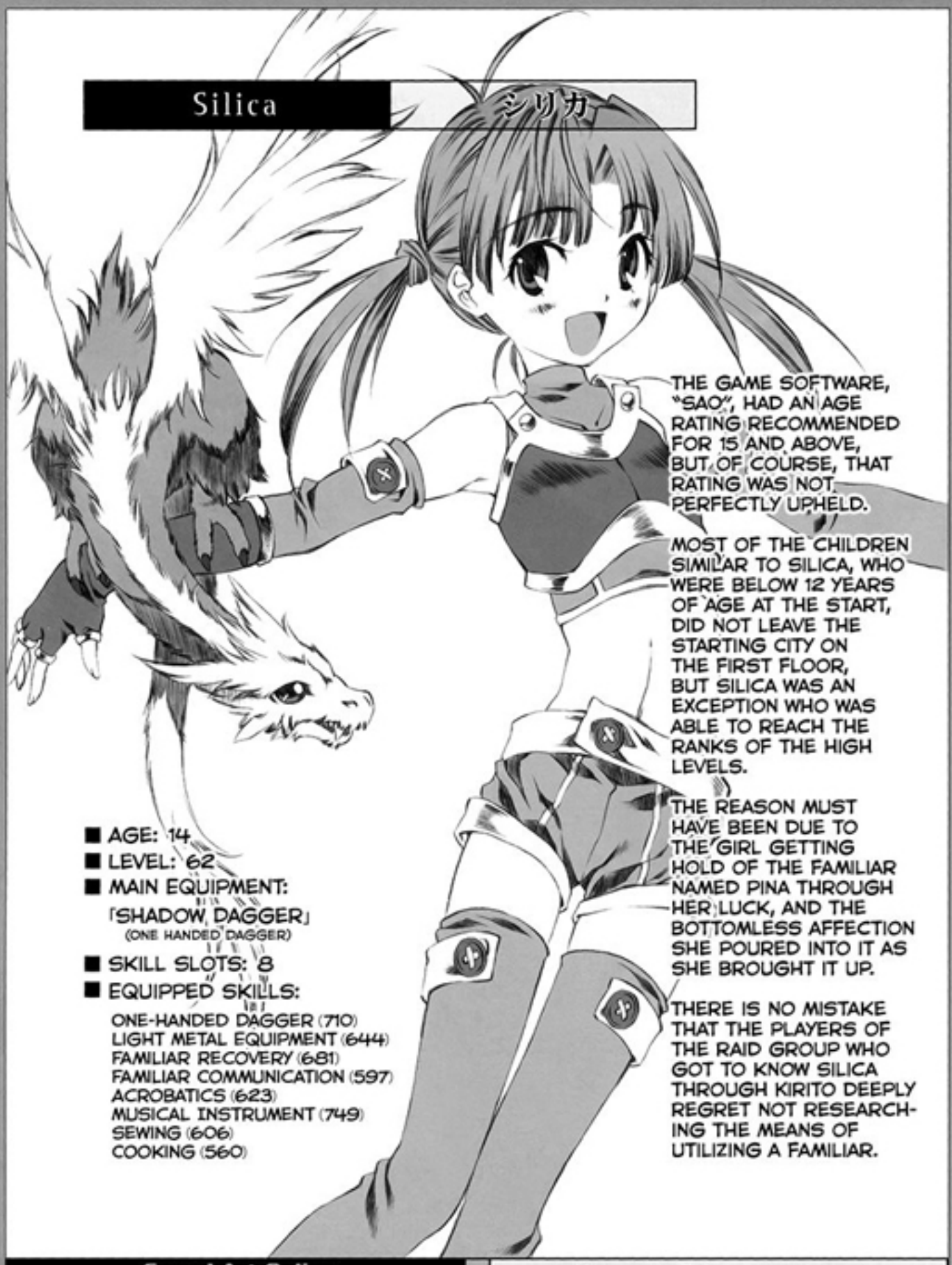
TO TRY AND DIVERT THEIR FEAR, THE ONES TRAPPED IN THE WORLD OF SAO MORE OR LESS ALL RESORTED TO EITHER AIMING FOR A GOAL, OR THROUGH PURE TENACITY.

IN LISBETH'S CASE, THAT WAS THE OWNERSHIP OF "HER OWN SHOP". TO THE GIRL WHOSE REAL FAMILY RUNS A SMALL RETAIL BUSINESS, CREATING AND SELLING THINGS MUST HAVE BEEN THE MOST SUITABLE MEANS OF PRESERVING HER SENSE OF LIVING ON.

HOWEVER, THANKS TO HER CHEERFUL PERSONALITY, SHE SOON EARNED MANY REGULARS AND FRIENDS, AND AS A RESULT, BEING A "SMITH" ADVANCED FROM HER FORM OF ESCAPISM TO HER OWN WAY OF CLEARING THE GAME.

IN ACTUAL FACT, AS THE SMITH WHO FORGED THE SWORD, "DARK REPULSER", THAT DEFEATED THE FINAL BOSS, HEALTHCLIFF, LISBETH'S NAME IS WIDELY MENTIONED EVEN AFTER THE RELEASE OF SAO.

# Silica シリカ



- AGE: 14
- LEVEL: 62
- MAIN EQUIPMENT:
  「SHADOW DAGGER」
  (ONE HANDED DAGGER)
- SKILL SLOTS: 8
- EQUIPPED SKILLS:
  ONE-HANDED DAGGER (710)
  LIGHT METAL EQUIPMENT (644)
  FAMILIAR RECOVERY (681)
  FAMILIAR COMMUNICATION (597)
  ACROBATICS (623)
  MUSICAL INSTRUMENT (749)
  SEWING (606)
  COOKING (560)

THE GAME SOFTWARE, "SAO", HAD AN AGE RATING RECOMMENDED FOR 15 AND ABOVE, BUT OF COURSE, THAT RATING WAS NOT PERFECTLY UPHELD.

MOST OF THE CHILDREN SIMILAR TO SILICA, WHO WERE BELOW 12 YEARS OF AGE AT THE START, DID NOT LEAVE THE STARTING CITY ON THE FIRST FLOOR, BUT SILICA WAS AN EXCEPTION WHO WAS ABLE TO REACH THE RANKS OF THE HIGH LEVELS.

THE REASON MUST HAVE BEEN DUE TO THE GIRL GETTING HOLD OF THE FAMILIAR NAMED PINA THROUGH HER LUCK, AND THE BOTTOMLESS AFFECTION SHE POURED INTO IT AS SHE BROUGHT IT UP.

THERE IS NO MISTAKE THAT THE PLAYERS OF THE RAID GROUP WHO GOT TO KNOW SILICA THROUGH KIRITO DEEPLY REGRET NOT RESEARCHING THE MEANS OF UTILIZING A FAMILIAR.

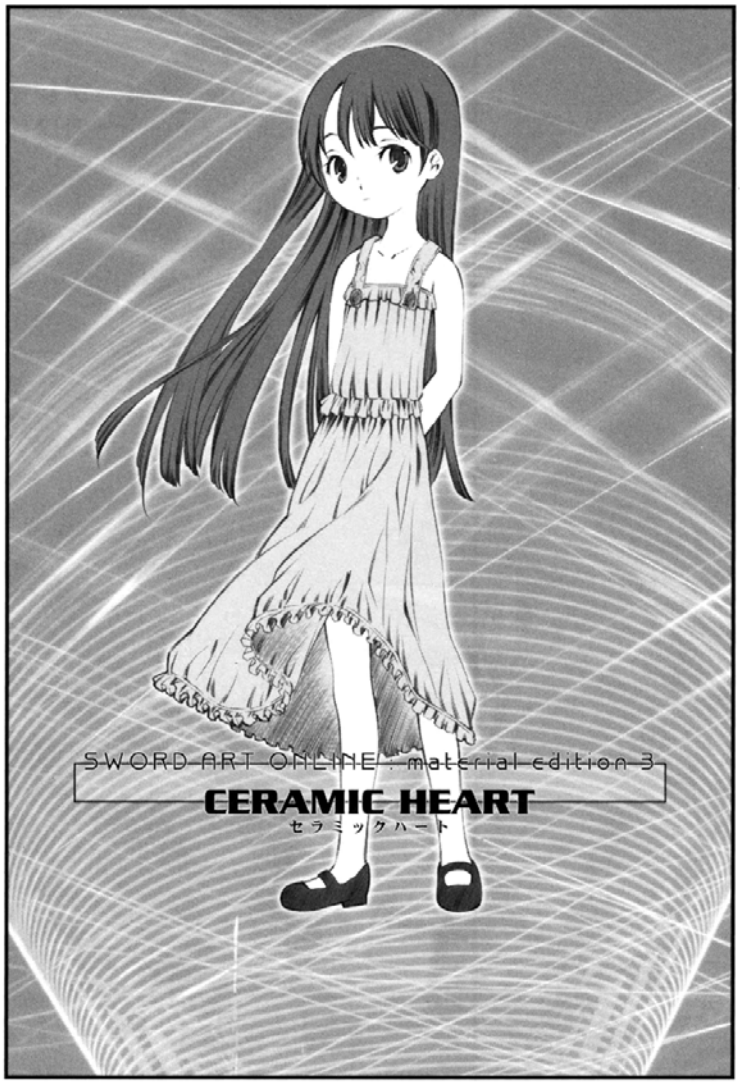
# [Sword Art Online : Material Edition 3]
## Ceramic Heart

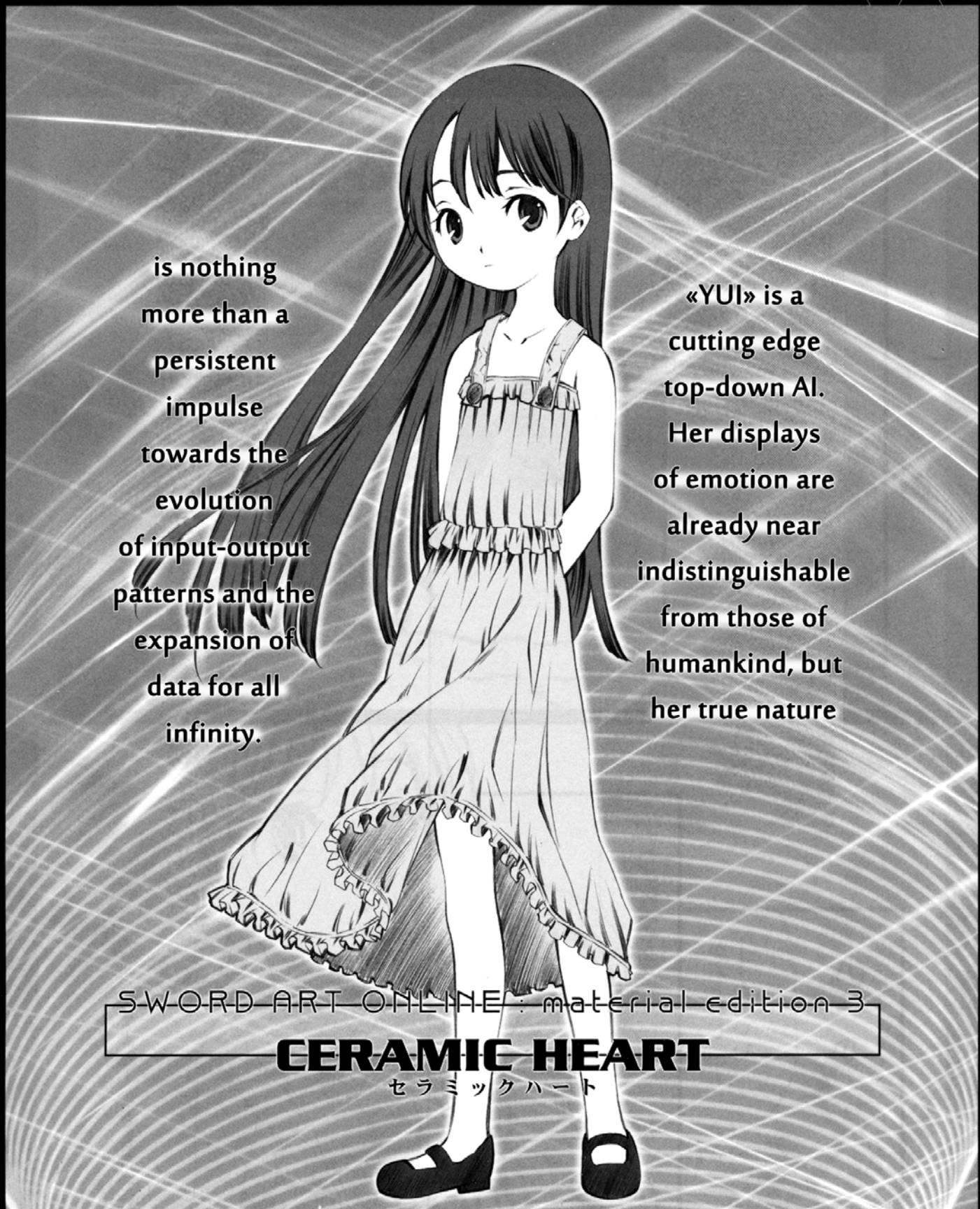
May 2008

The third's a manga again, but it'll be the last spurt (haha).

The story, SAO, is a fantasy veiled as science fiction, so all sorts of technologically advanced elements appear, but the A.I. girl, «Yui» might be the most implausible one out of the bunch. I always did have the desire to write about how exactly the girl's «intellect» worked someday, and although it definitely isn't anything like a serious SF theme, it's still beyond my abilities, so if the ideas could be conveyed at least... was what I hoped for as I drew this manga... or it should have been, but...

Anyway, upon reading through it again this time, my thoughts were, "That grandpa's a real challenger!" I want to become an online game player like this when I grow old too.




«YUI» is a cutting edge top-down AI. Her displays of emotion are already near indistinguishable from those of humankind, but her true nature is nothing more than a persistent impulse towards the evolution of input-output patterns and the expansion of data for all infinity.

SWORD ART ONLINE : material edition 3

# CERAMIC HEART

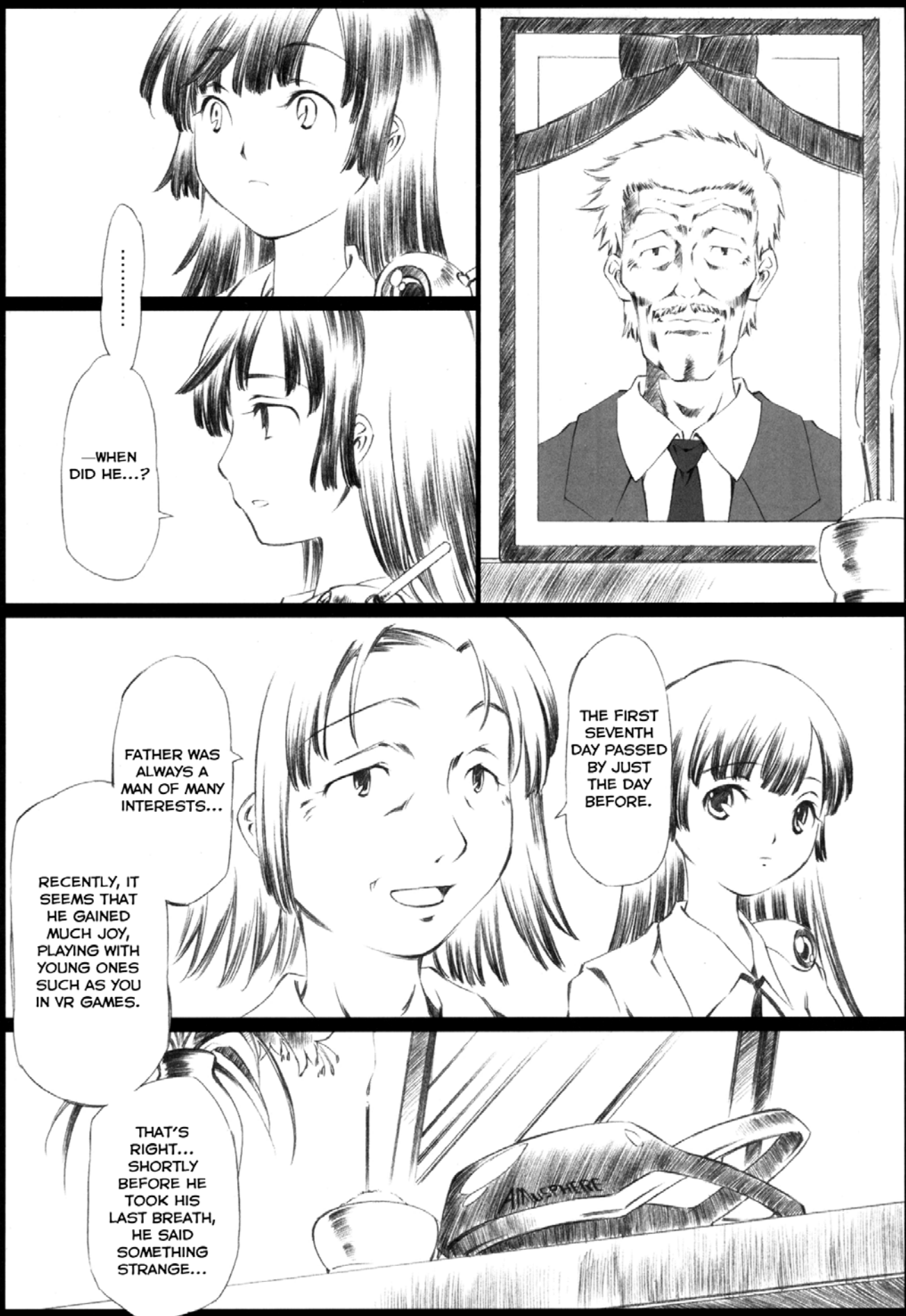
セラミックハート

In the world of the series, a «Top-down AI» is defined as a pseudo artificial intelligence built from a program atop an existing computer architecture, while a «Bottom-up AI» is defined as a true artificial intelligence that creates a reproduction of the human brain structure through an electronic device. In other words, a top-down AI would be, quite simply, nothing but a cluster filled with patterns of ones and zeros, such as one that would «answer "I'm home" with "Welcome back"».

WITHIN FULL SENSORY IMMERSION TYPE MMO-RPG «ALFHEIM ONLINE»
COORDINATES 0362-0590 SYLPH TERRITORY CAPITAL «SYLVAIN» OUTSKIRTS
JST YEAR 2016 18TH MAY 14:30 HOURS
THE SUN... —WARM.
THE BREEZE... FEELS GOOD.
STRAW-BERRY MILK-SHAKE.
TASTY.
RHINO-CEROS BEETLE... —CUTE.
のそのそ
Field MOB 1.2m long

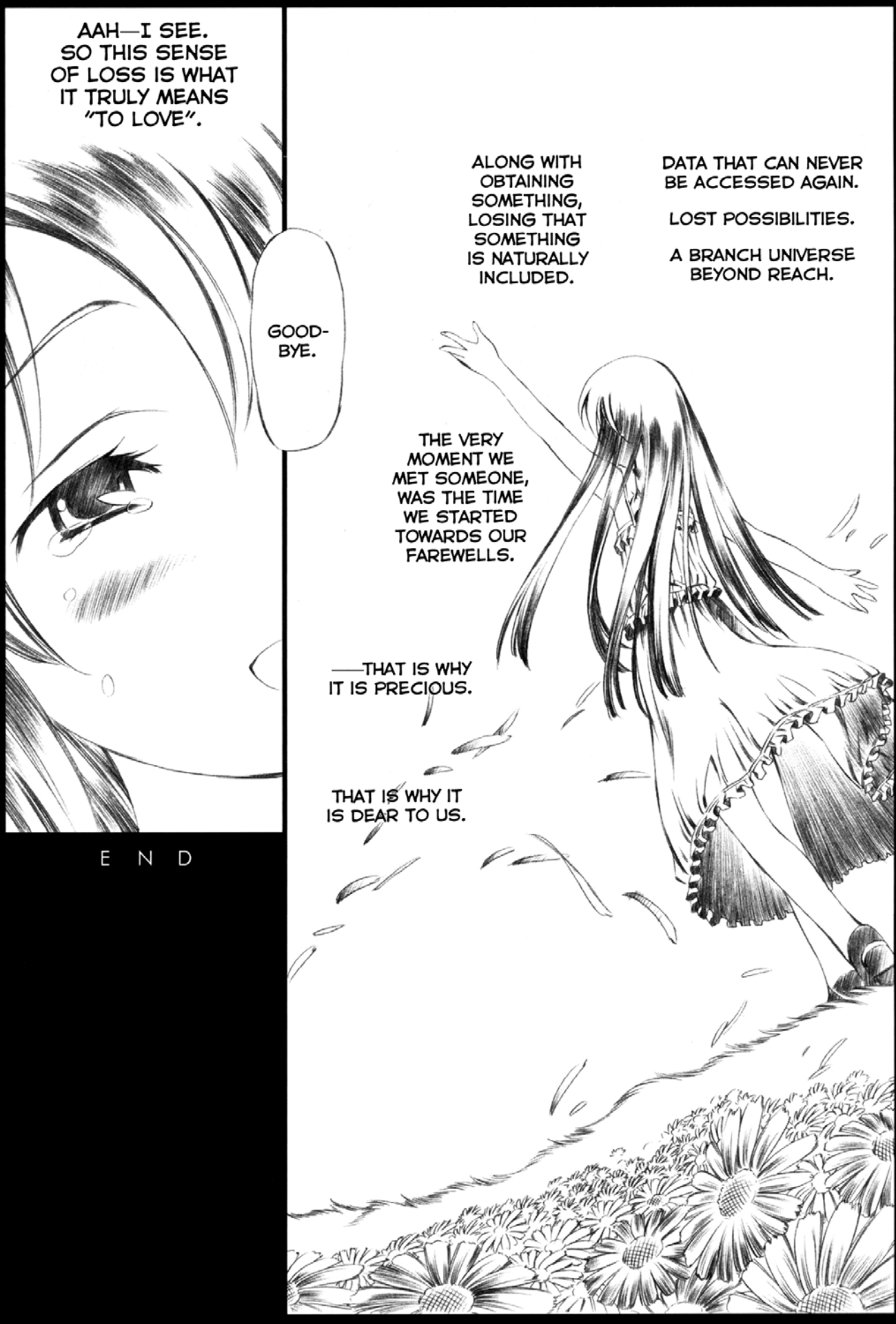
THAT IS THE FEELING TO "LOVE" ANOTHER PERSON...
HOWEVER, THERE IS A SINGLE EMOTION THAT STILL COULD NOT BE OPTIMISED.
10 Days Earlier ——— Same Coordinates
YOU... HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE, HAVEN'T YOU?
I'VE ALWAYS SEEN YOU AROUND... AND WELL, THAT IS...
I FELL IN LOVE WITH YOU.
"LOVE"... COVETOUS-NESS? MONOPO-LISATION?
I'M SORRY.
I WILL NOT BECOME YOURS.
N- NO, NO! THAT'S NOT WHY I SAID IT, I WON'T EVEN NEED A REPLY!
I WILL BE RETIRING FROM THIS GAME SOON, SO...
I WANTED TO AT LEAST SPEAK WITH YOU AT THE VERY END, THAT'S ALL.
IT'S JUST ...

...I DON'T UNDERSTAND.
THE EXISTENCE OF DATA THAT I CAN'T GATHER OR OPTIMISE SIMPLY PUTS ME AT UNEASE. WHY EXACTLY DID THAT PERSON SAY THAT HE "WON'T NEED A REPLY"...?
...THEN.
THERE'S NO WAY BUT TO MEET UP WITH THAT BOY AGAIN AND ASK HIM, IS THERE?
—WELL, TO BE HONEST NOW...
I NEVER THOUGHT WE WOULD END UP SEARCHING FOR HIM IN THE REAL WORLD...
SORRY, MAMA. THAT PERSON HAD ALREADY DELETED HIS ACCOUNT...
I DO NOT KNOW WHY, BUT I FEEL LIKE I DEFINITELY HAVE TO TALK WITH HIM AGAIN.
IT'S FINE, I WANT TO KNOW TOO ♥
AH... THIS IS THE HOUSE, ISN'T IT...?
OH, MY!
DO EXCUSE ME, BUT IS THERE A PERSON BY THE NAME, "SAITOU SHOICHI", HERE?
※The object mounted on Asuna's left shoulder is the «Bidirectional Communication Probe». It is merely a communication device, not Yui's actual body.
※User information hacked by Yui from the administration side is loaded onto the terminal.


.....
—WHEN DID HE...?
THE FIRST SEVENTH DAY PASSED BY JUST THE DAY BEFORE.
FATHER WAS ALWAYS A MAN OF MANY INTERESTS...
RECENTLY, IT SEEMS THAT HE GAINED MUCH JOY, PLAYING WITH YOUNG ONES SUCH AS YOU IN VR GAMES.
THAT'S RIGHT... SHORTLY BEFORE HE TOOK HIS LAST BREATH, HE SAID SOMETHING STRANGE...
AMUSPHERE

※The AMUSPHERE is the full VR machine that succeeded the first-gen Nerve Gear, targeted at consumers. Although the specifications have been slightly lowered, its strengthened security and low price earned it many users.

MY MOTHER... THAT IS, MY FATHER'S SPOUSE HAS DEPARTED SINCE QUITE LONG AGO, BUT...
HE SAID THAT HE MET AND SPOKE WITH MOTHER FROM THE OLD DAYS ON "THE OTHER SIDE", AND HE WAS SIMPLY SO HAPPY ABOUT IT...
THAT EVEN AFTER LIVING THROUGH EIGHTY YEARS, AT THE END OF IT ALL, GOD STILL WOULDN'T SPARE A THOUGHT FOR HIM, AS HE KEPT LAUGHING.
—I WONDER IF THAT PERSON WOULD HAVE TALKED MUCH MORE IF I ANSWERED DIFFERENTLY?
COULD HE HAVE TAUGHT ME WHAT HE LAUGHED AT AND GOTTEN DEPRESSED OVER; THE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS HE WENT THROUGH OVER THAT EXTENSIVE "LIFE" THAT STRETCHED BEYOND TWO AND A HALF BILLION SECONDS?
BUT THAT WOULD HAPPEN NO MORE. ALL THE EXPERIENCES AND MEMORIES ACCUMULATED BY THAT PERSON HAVE ALREADY BEEN ERASED, WITHOUT A SINGLE BYTE REMAINING.


AAH—I SEE. SO THIS SENSE OF LOSS IS WHAT IT TRULY MEANS "TO LOVE".
GOOD-BYE.
ALONG WITH OBTAINING SOMETHING, LOSING THAT SOMETHING IS NATURALLY INCLUDED.
DATA THAT CAN NEVER BE ACCESSED AGAIN.
LOST POSSIBILITIES.
A BRANCH UNIVERSE BEYOND REACH.
THE VERY MOMENT WE MET SOMEONE, WAS THE TIME WE STARTED TOWARDS OUR FAREWELLS.
——THAT IS WHY IT IS PRECIOUS.
THAT IS WHY IT IS DEAR TO US.

E N D

ME-04

# Cold hand, Warm heart

Aincrad 50th Floor
September 2024

SAO SWORD ART ONLINE

# Sword Art Online: Material Edition 4
# Cold hand, Warm heart

November 2008

From this Fourth Material Edition onwards, the rest will shift to the novel format.

What I'm writing might look like an excuse (Laughs). My take on the work is, «Conveying the visual image in my head», . Because it works as a tool for transmission, I feel there is no essential difference whether it is in pictures or words form.

Of course, a picture (manga) conveys a visual message with more power and a large foundation, but sometimes, «a scene that is hard to draw» does exist... and so, as an active novelist, my existing aim is to write an article of which «its visuals can be seen through reading». Although it is quite difficult.

Ah, concerning this text, I still haven't mentioned anything about the content yet...eh, it is about Kirito-shi and Asuna san, as always.

After completing a day of hunting, I returned to my house on the fiftieth floor, which was located in «Algade», but my body still had that marvelously uncomfortable feeling.

My body movement became slow. I couldn't stand straight. My entire body felt like I was carrying a prop which my back could not achieve the required strength, it felt really heavy, as I opened the main menu window, but could not see any place written in red.

As I unsteadily staggered out onto the path from the square, my thoughts remained uninterrupted.

If this discomfort is a negative status, there should be a warning flashing before my eyes. And since I'm within the District Boundary, negative status such as poison and paralysis should be removed.

Maybe I got affected by a new unknown monster's negative status effects. Even after entering the boundary it did not disappear, and at the same time does not trigger a warning ―― something like «Curse».

At this point, an evil cold crept up from my toes to my body, causing me to shiver.

It is still September in Aincrad, too early for winter. But, going through my coat, penetrating deep into my muscles and bones, was like the wind of winter.

I couldn't return to my room under these conditions. Thinking like this, I increased my pace, going into the first hotel I discovered. I quickly rented an empty room at the front desk, and after taking the key I rolled and crawled to the front of the furthest door from the desk.

As I sat on a simple bed in the narrow room, I unequipped all my equipments to make my body feel lighter, then took out all kinds of antidotes for all kinds of negative statuses and tried them all one by one. I then used a Crystal which could remove all negative effects, and awaited the moment for I returned to normal.

―― However.

"......This..... is..... Really bad....."

This evil cold did not leave, and my field of vision began to blur.

I could no longer withstand it and collapsed onto the bed, and using my brain, whose operating speed had dropped to very low levels, to think, desperately searched for a countermeasure. If this was the «Curse», an NPC in the church should be able to remove it right? However, was there really a church in the *disorderly* [Chaos] Algade's streets?

As I was filtering out the buildings on the map, my consciousness began to fade, so I had no choice but to decide to seek help from others. In other words, I had given up on the idea of solving it on my own.

I opened the directory to my list of friends. With my blurred vision, I searched for Cline's name from a list that couldn't be considered long, selected it, and pressed the button for sending messages, and immediately typed out on the virtual keyboard.

[I can't handle it　I'm dying　Save me]

After keying in this message which was rich with crisis, yet did not lose its poetic flavor, I pressed the send button, then turned the room into the «Friends Allowed» mode, and lost consciousness.

My forehead was caressed by a cool comforting touch.

As I stirred, I discovered that I was covered by a thick quilt. The bone chilling evil cold had also changed into sweltering sweat inducing heat.

In this uncomfortable heat, the only cool object was applied to my forehead, controlled by a constantly moving hand. At this moment ——

"Ah, you're awake?"

A refreshingly sweet voice came from beside my pillow. As the word repeated itself a few times in my brain, I realized that it totally didn't sound like Cline's crude "Oi, you've woken up".

I desperately opened my heavy eyelids, the thing swaying in my sight was... the «Knights of Blood» Sub Leader, the strongest rapier user, «The Flash» Asuna who actually revealed a gentle smile.

"...!!?!?"

I was so surprised I wanted to bounce up, but Asuna immediately used her left hand to hold me down.

"Not lying down won't do. Although it won't make you better immediately."

She used her index finger to poke at my cheeks.

What is this all about? How did this happen? Is seeing Cline as Asuna caused by this mysterious negative effect? If this is the case should I call Egil?

These bursts of stupid questions hit me as my brain worked, before finally realizing the truth.

According to the order in the list of friends, Asuna's name was just above Cline's. In my semi conscious state and blurring vision, I just wanted to press his name, and must have pressed the wrong one. In other words, I had sent Asuna ——— Aincrad's idol, as well as the heroine of the raiders, some embarrassing information.

What should I do? What is the best action to take?

My brain continued to operate inside my head, as Asuna dunked the damp towel into a basin next to me. *Plop*, the sound of water being displaced could be heard.

The towel was quickly taken back out, squeezed dry, and applied to my forehead once more. The cool comfortable feeling slightly dispersed the heat gathered onto my body.

"The cooling effect of water doesn't last long, but this is the only option. It's better than nothing."

Seeing the smiling Asuna, I could only emit ——— a single phrase.

"Tha.....Thank you. Helping me with this."

Subsequently, my cheeks turned into a pink shade, and feeling this change, quickly turned my head to the side, to see Asuna smiling again.

"It's nothing. We should help each other in a moment of need. A person on his own would definitely feel uncomfortable, I understand."

At this kind of time.

That said, Asuna should have experienced this mysterious negative status effect before.

"What kind of negative status effect is this.....? All kinds of antidotes, as well as the Crystal doesn't work on it.....?"

After I inquired, Asuna's hazel eyes blinked.

Then broke out in laughter.

"Ahahaha..... So-sorry..... but..... huff huff..... Being like this, is it your first time?"

"Of..... Of course it is the first time. I've never heard of this status effect."

I replied in an injured tone, and Asuna apologized a few more times, while mopping my head with the wet towel.

"I say, this negative status effect, is neither poison nor paralysis.... it's a sickness. You caught a cold."

"Co.....Cold?"

"Um. It's not your avatar, but your body in the real world which caught a cold. Right now, the seasons should be changing over there. Around this time last year, many people collapsed from this."

"A.....Aah....."

I could not help but sigh.

It was completely in my blind spot. However, this was truly possible. Although the body's five senses were completely cut off, the Nerve Gear was unable to isolate fever and other physical discomfort. In other words, as Asuna said, my real body was what gave me such discomfort.

"Which is why I said, a cool forehead can let you feel more comfortable."

With that said, I looked away from Asuna who was once again wetting the towel, to determine the time. It was eleven thirty at night.

Since I rolled and crawled into this hotel at around six, Asuna had continued to do this for five hours.

Using the «Wettable cloth equipment» to produce a cooling effect, could only last for five minutes at most. Although it was very comfortable, isn't it a waste of effort?

Suddenly, an odd feeling emerged from my chest, causing me to have no idea what to do. In my semi conscious state, I had no idea what this feeling meant.

Instead, I moved my hand out from under the quilt, and held the towel on my forehead, getting ready for Asuna's hand to take it.

"What..... What is it?"

Although her words became obscure, Asuna maintained her smile, while on the other hand I couldn't find any words to reply her. I didn't understand what I was doing either.

It was clearly like this, but my mouth emitted some words in a rough voice on its own.

"Enough with this towel. Instead of it..... just use your hands to touch my forehead."

—— *Don't take advantage of my weakness!!*

Was what I had expected her to spit out, but contrary to my expectations, "..... Em" Asuna answered in a quiet voice.

Squeezing my hand in reply, she used her cool hands to brush across my forehead with the other. As my body was exhausted, my consciousness gradually faded. The anxiety of getting the disease made way for a comfortable sense of security.

As I entered a light sleep, By my ear, I could hear a soft lullaby.

"I said, you..... Kirito..... kun. It's ok to give your cold..... over to me. Like that, you might be able to recover faster."

After that, I could feel a gentle kind of touch to the cheeks, on my face with my eyes closed.

I wanted to open my eyes to confirm ——— Obviously, I was unable to do so.

"............ooh............."

Asuna grunted, and opened her eyes.

The view entering her eyes was not the white ceiling of her home, but instead it was the black of an old wooden board. The bed was hard and the blanket was thin. Despite complaining to herself to find a better room, she was not in the condition to get out of bed.

Could it be —— a real cold?

No, it is impossible to be infected by a virus in the virtual world. The players were completely separated in the real word, connected only by wires. However, this is too much coincidence!

The strongest solo player, «The Black Swordsman» Kirito, perhaps due to the excellent physical condition, as well as the overnight care by Asuna, had recovered. This is good. This is fine enough.

However, facing this exchange, she didn't think about her own collapse. Asuna was sitting beside Kirito's bed, humming a lullaby until she fell asleep. Based on the sun shining through the window, it was now evening.

She looked away —— to the empty chair by the bed.

In the midst of her mind, she recalled that until afternoon, Asuna was changing the wet cloth on the forehead constantly. But, seeing Asuna asleep, Kirito probably went out to complete his daily hunting.

"Maa..... there is nothing I can do about it."

She whispered aloud.

Different from Asuna who was associated with a guild, Solo Kirito had no training partners. If he missed one day of hunting, it would require a lot of effort to make up for it. She understood this, but.

To be relied on, that happy and warm feeling, still could not stop the buried feelings of cold loneliness. Her body was obviously hot, but in her chest was an icy coldness, she could not help but let her tears emerge.

"......Aaaa..... This won't do..... as expected."

Tightly closing her eyes, she buried her head into the blanket, just then ——

Suddenly, in the middle of the room a blue vortex shined. As a hum was issued, a two meter high elliptic door appeared.

"......Corridor Crystal."

Her head left the pillow to say these words, when a black figure jumped out of the door.

Of course, this was the Black Swordsman Kirito. And no one else. However ——

"I, I say..... Can't you come in from the main door....."

At this point, Asuna was finally aware, that Kirito had brought something.

It was a large wooden bucket. No, it should be called a basin.

The basin was filled with grains that glowed white, reflecting the light of the afternoon sun.

After looking at it for a few seconds, she finally realized what it was.

"That..... that is, snow.....? But..... where did you get it, in this season?"

After that question, Kirito carefully placed the basin on the table, faced Asuna, and lowered his head.

"I'm sorry, I came back too late! I intended to come back earlier..... it's all because of that tough dragon....."

Kirito's words reminded Asuna of the tall mountain that was full of ice and snow. It was at the top of one of the hills that was located at one end on the fifty eighth floor. However, climbing that mountain required encountering many monsters along the

extremely long mountain road, and at the end of the road, the regional boss monster, the Ice Dragon waited. Being able to go there and return in two hours was nothing short of a miracle.

"......Why would you go this far....."

Kirito did not answer Asuna's question, picked up the towel on the table, and put it into the ice basin. Upon taking it out, the towel was completely frozen.

"Lie down."

At these words, Asuna's head returned to the pillow, and the ice cold towel was placed on her forehead. «Frozen towel» produced a cooling sensation much higher than the wet towel.

"Ah..... Comfortable....."

The End.

As Asuna smiled and said this, Kirito shyly laughed.

Her forehead obviously felt very cold, yet at the same time she could feel a gentle warmth. Asuna blinked, then stretched out her hand, and held the hand which protruded from the sleeves of the black clothes.

The hand Kirito had used to collect snow had become cold, but after holding tightly for a while the temperature was restored, so Asuna held on tightly.

" I say..... this time I will pass my cold over to you."

Listening to this, Kirito replied with a bitter smile.

"Then this will have no end."

"Isn't that fine? If you collapse again, I will go to collect snow and ice, and make shaved ice for you to eat"

".....If it is like this, collapsing will not be that bad."

Maintaining a smiling face, Asuna closed her eyes, and waited for that moment.

(End)

# *Salvia*

Kawagoe, Saitama
Junuary 2025

# Sword Art Online: Material Edition 5
# Salvia

***January 2025***

"I'm at my limit already~"

Glancing at the side of Kazuto's face who leaked the complaints in a miserable voice, Suguha tried not to laugh and raised her voice,

"Not yet! Only 20 more!"

Two people continued swinging their shinai in the harsh cold weather of the morning. For Kazuto, swinging 300 times every morning is still very tough. Despite saying 'Can't~' or 'I'm dying~' every few minutes, he still continued until the end. His willpower is what Suguha always looked up to.

"298, .....299, .....OK, finish~"

"My arms.....I can't feel my arms....."

This morning Kazuto somehow finished swinging too, after passing the shinai to Suguha, he walked to the veranda and lay on top of the plank. Smiling at the scene, Suguha wiped both shinai with a cloth while leaning next to the black pine trunk. She pulled a handkerchief out of her jersey pocket and wiped her sweat, relieving her breath.

A few days ago, the yard was still covered in snow, but it had disappeared completely due to the recent continuous fine weather. Suguha noticed the earth in the planter, which was arranged alongside the graveled path that turns from the yard to the door, was already dry. She then mercilessly said to the dying body at the veranda,

"Onii-chan, fill up that watering can and bring it here~"

Several seconds later, Kazuto lifelessly replied 'K~~' and got up, he pulled an old watering can from under the veranda, collected water from the tap at the corner of the yard and handed it to Suguha. She received and tilted it at the planter, fine droplets of water came showering a curved line, accompanied by a light sound.

".....What is this flower?"

Kazuto asked, squatting and glancing at a small flower with a pale orange color in front of him.

"It's an Adonis, red chichibu type."

"Hmm..... So it blooms in this season"

On hearing Suguha's answer, Kazuto poked a petal of the adonis while deep in thought.

"At our house, this flower blooms the earliest. .....But Onii-chan, why are you interested in the flower?"

"No... It's just that 'that side' also has a similar flower. .....How about this planter? It looks empty."

"Oh, in that one I'll sow Salvia seeds when spring arrives, then they will bloom in the summer."

"Salvia..... what kind of flower is that?"

Finishing the watering, Suguha showered the remaining water in the can at the base of black pine, then answered with a surprised voice,

"It bloomed every year didn't it? It's red and when blooming, they look like many small goldfish. Onii-chan, when we were young, you always removed the flower to taste its nectar and caused mother to get angry every time."

Upon hearing, Kazuto face started showing signs of amazement.

"N..Nectar!? Did I really do such a survivor-like thing.....?"

"Ah—— you already forgot about it. I was sad my share was gone too."

".....My share?"

"Ah....."

Realizing she inadvertently said an unnecessary thing, Suguha shrugged and stuck out her tongue.

"Wait..... now I remember....."

The grin floated onto Kazuto's face.

"The one mother was angry at wasn't me but you, Sugu. I think she said 'Didn't we agree no more than 3 per day?'"

"Haha, caught me, you remembered it so well. Even these days it is still a mystery to me how sweet the nectar from Salvia is."

"Hmm, I can't remember the taste....."

Kazuto aimlessly glanced at the space in front of him while searching through the bottom of his memories——

"Ah—....."

He stood still but his eyes suddenly went wide open.

"....? What is it, Onii-chan"

"No.....that's right.....come to think of it....."

Suguha looked up worriedly at the Kazuto's face, who muttered words she couldn't understand. Suddenly, he closed the distance between them while looking into her eyes. Suguha's heart throbbed, trying to hide her hot cheeks, she hastily jumped a step backward.

"W..What? Don't surprise me like that"

".....Sugu, do you have time now?"

"Eh? .....There's no class today, so it's alright, but why.....?"

"Well then, let's go out for a bit"

Kazuto grabbed Suguha's arm, who was still unable to grasp the situation, and walked quickly toward the eaves of the main building.

"W..Wait, where are we going?"

"Don't ask yet, just sit on the back seat"

He pulled out his mountain bike and removed the number lock attached to it.

"Eh—, I'm still in this outfit, it’s a bit....."

Suguha complained while looking down at her green school jersey, but Kazuto just smiled and said,

"That is appropriate for the roadwork anyway."

"They use cooler looking jerseys for that! .....It really can't be helped then..."

After saying her point, she sat down on the rear carrier of MTB with her arms wrapped around Kazuto's waist and clung on tightly. She began to worry that he would hear the sound of her heart which was currently beating like an alarm bell.

"Hold on tight!"

When Kazuto forcefully stepped on the pedals, the sound of the wind put her thoughts to rest and the back wheel kicked a pebble, causing a small sound. The MTB started gaining momentum, and once it went past the front gate, began to run.

It was already past eight, being a weekday, there were lines of people walking on the road outside of the station. But the bicycle that both were riding on headed in the opposite direction from the flow. Suguha felt the people they passed were smiling at the siblings, she buried her face behind Kazuto's back and quietly said,

"T..This is embarrassing, Onii-chan! How much further are we're going?"

"Won't be too far..... probably....."

"Probably—!?"

The bicycle went on steadily until the outskirts of the residential area, even though the rear carrier was made of metal, sitting was comfortable because the MTB's tire was attached to a thick suspension.

It was around ten minutes on the bicycle when they reached the back of a small shrine, Kazuto put on the brakes. They were at a corner of an old residential area, by then it was already quiet without pedestrian traffic.

".....Here?"

"....."

There was no answer to her question, Kazuto got off the bike, Suguha also jumped off the rear carrier. She put her hands on her hips and said,

".....Now, explain it properly already, is there anything at this shrine?"

"....."

Surely this lonely shrine must be Kazuto's destination. Just as she thought that, Kazuto crossed the road to the opposite side of the shrine. There stood the gate to a solitary luxurious house.

"....? Is this the house of your acquaintance?"

Suguha stood next to him, the house exterior was built with tiles of red bricks, palisade painted in white enclosed a large garden which was covered in color of dried straw. There was a small child who was waiting for its parents on a red tricycle.

Suguha looked up to Kazuto's face, wanting to ask her question again, but eventually, he shook his head slowly.

"No..... I don't know this house. But here..... It was a wide vacant lot and it was full of grass.

Phew, he breathed loudly with a slight smile.

".....Well.....It was from seven, or eight years ago anyway....."

"Vacant lot.....? Is there something at that place.....?"

"Nope, nothing..... Well, let's go back."

"I don't understand, we came all the way to this place just to look for a vacant lot—?"

After self-concluding, he turned back, Kazuto shrugged and started walking to the bicycle. Suguha watched his back and when she was about to follow him——

"Ah....."

A bright blue scene had filled her vision.

One corner of the lawn was enclosed with bricks, it was a small flower bed. In the middle was cold resistant plants spread with deep green leaves, and hidden within —— there was a dense short grass with a large amount of blooming small blue flowers.

"......It's the Salvia."

"......Eh?"

Suguha's voice reached Kazuto, who was looking at the flower bed next to him.

"Salvia..... Where is it?"

"Here, the blue flowers."

"But..... Sugu said earlier it's a red flower?"

"There are hundreds of species within the Salvia genus, this one is a Blue Salvia species. But, it's strange....."

When Suguha tilted her head, the back door of the big house opened. A young lady wearing an apron came out, her long hair was tied in a pony tail, in her hands was a shiny tin watering can.

The lady expanded her eyes a little when she saw the siblings, she then immediately smiled while approaching them and said,

"Good morning"

"Ah.. G..Good morning"

The siblings hastily returned greetings.

"Are you two from the neighborhood?"

"Y..Yes"

"Is there anything I could help?"

"Er..Erm... well....."

Blocked in front of Kazuto who struggled with his words, Suguha quickly said,

"I think these Salvia are very beautiful!"

"Is that so? Well, thank you."

The lady smiled cheerfully, Suguha continued saying with relief,

"But.....normally Salvia won't be blooming past December, right? Are these a special kind?"

"Ah..... I also think it's strange. Even though they're a perennial plant, in November every year the flowers would already start to fall off, but this year even past new year, the flowers are still there..... Unfortunately, I don't know if these are normal Blue Salvia or not....."

"Don't know.....?"

"These Salvia were already here before my house was even built, during the construction we had to move them slightly. But every year after that they are still blooming healthily here."

"I..Is that so?"

Suddenly Kazuto shouted, causing Suguha and the lady to be surprised.

"W..What is it, Onii-chan."

"Ah, well...."

Kazuto hesitated for a bit, then timidly said,

".....The one who sowed these Salvia was me, .....seven years ago....."

"E..Eh!?"

"Oh, really!"

Suguha was astonished upon hearing an unexpected answer while the lady who embraced the watering can at her chest wore a big smile on her face.

"Is that so, then these flowers must have been waiting for you. Ah.....wait a moment."

The lady hunched to put the watering can down, then walked quickly into the house. In a short while the figure reappeared with a small shovel in her right hand, she lowered the white plastic pot in her left hand to the ground.

While Suguha and Kazuto were watching, the lady dug the shovel into one corner of the Blue Salvia bunch and carefully pulled three stumps out, then put them into the flowerpot. She brought a vinyl bag from her apron pocket and put the flowerpot into it. With a smiling face and both hands holding the bag, she offered it to Kazuto.

"Let's split it, please take this."

"Ah.....No, it's too much....."

"It's alright, the flowers will surely be delighted too."

".....Thank you very much. Then I'll accept your kind offer....."

Kazuto lowered his head while accepting the bag. The contents shook slightly and Suguha's nose was tickled by a faint aroma.

"Well then, feel free to visit anytime. In spring there will be a lot more blooming."

"OK, now we must be going"

Kazuto bowed his head again to the lady who began to scatter water with the watering can, then began walking.

"Well, Sugu, let's go back."

"O..Ok. .....Good bye"

Still not understanding the situation, Suguha bowed and followed Kazuto.

Kazuto didn't ride the bicycle, instead he pulled it with one hand and started walking. Next to him, filled with curiosity, Suguha quickly asked him,

"Wait, Onii-chan, what's going on? You really planted those!?"

"Ah—, how to say it....."

Kazuto stopped the bicycle in front of the stone steps after walking half a circle around the shrine perimeter. His face went slightly red, 'Ah~', 'Uu~', cleared his throat with 'Ahem ahem', then he suddenly offered the bag in his right hand to Suguha.

"Sugu, your birthday present."

"Hah!? .....It's not my birthday yet though?"

"It's from seven years ago."

Still not understanding, Suguha tilted her head while her glance was filled with questions.

".....Seven years ago..... On Sugu's birthday. You wished to gather a lot of Salvia to get its nectar, so I bought some seeds with my allowance and planted them at that vacant lot. But later I couldn't find the road to the shrine, I spent a while searching and eventually gave up. At that time I was very sad..... Then, this time I found it in one go. A child's memory is really unreliable."

"Onii-chan....."

Suguha's eyes opened wide, she shyly averted her gaze from Kazuto's face. Her chest felt tight with the various emotions that had overflown within her heart.

Stretching out her right hand, she gently pulled a Salvia flower which peeped out from the bag's opening. She received the droplet that came off from its base with the tip of her tongue. It was faint, but the vivid sweetness quickly spread inside her mouth —— At that moment, Suguha felt the flow of the many years of time she spent with Kazuto breeze through her. Before she realized it, two streaks of tears had already flowed passed her cheeks and dropped to her feet.

"O..Oi, don't suddenly cry....."

Suguha jumped into Kazuto's chest, who had faltered due to sudden panicking. Both hands wrapped around his back, she embraced him with all her strength. Before long, she felt Kazuto caress her head gently. Cheeks still pressed on to Kazuto's chest, she whispered quietly while the sweetness was still lingering in her mouth,

"I love you.....Onii-chan"

ME-06

# Algade Showdown

Aincrad 22nd Floor
October 2024

SWORD ART ONLINE

# Algade Showdown

***(Aincrad 22nd floor, October 2024)***

On a certain evening, a few days after the newly married life of Asuna and I begun, in the log house inside the deep forests on Aincrad's 22nd floor.

While talking about places visited during the day or eaten dishes, on the sofa which was placed in front of the fireplace, Asuna suddenly said what she was thinking aloud.

"Hey, Kirito-kun. I think, maybe that person wasn't an NPC but a player....."

"".....Haa?"

Not understanding her sudden topic, my mouth was left slightly opened.

While sitting side by side on the sofa, her lips continued to sip from her tea cup.

"Well, that shop's master, I naturally believed he was an NPC without a doubt..... But today, somehow, while I was watching his face, I suddenly felt that that person is actually a player."

The subject of our conversation was a restaurant. It was located deep within the back of the back and even further back of the lower part of the 50th floor's main block town «Algade». If we were to go there without a map, not just arriving at the destination, coming back out would be difficult. Actually «restaurant» was not an appropriate word to describe it, «Food Shop» would be more suitable. Its name was «Algade House».

The building looked as if it would collapse if it was blown by a somewhat strong wind. There was a sign curtain hung at the sliding door entrance. The interior had a stone floor —— or rather a bare concrete floor, there were two 4-seat-tables and another four seats at the counter. All the furniture had a strong presence of cheapness, and it wasn't like they were specially ordered to make them cheap either.

In the menu, there were only 3 entries. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled» and «Algade Boiled», none of them had any motivation behind their naming. They were, in the menu order, a ramen which didn't look like a ramen, an okonomiyaki which didn't look like an okonomiyaki, and last one, I still don't have any idea what it is supposed to be.

The order was then cooked by the same shopkeeper. While Asuna was saying «that shop's master», My mind imagined the short master with a white smock and a white

toque, whose round face of unknown age was hidden behind the long forelock, then I finally replied,

"......P..Player? ......but that person didn't say anything....."

"At least he did say 'Welcome' and 'Thank you'."

"Those are normal for NPC though. ......actually if you target him with the cursor....."

Saying up to this point, I noticed something.

There is a definite distinction between a player and an NPC, focusing the gaze on the target will bring up the «Color Cursor». Although both types would appear in green, for an NPC, under the HP bar will be a clearly displayed【NPC】. But this distinction method wouldn't work inside the shop, as it was classified as inside a building, due to the consideration of the system. It is probably impossible to eat quietly if the cursor kept appearing whenever someone is seen, so even if I focus my gaze on the store's master, the cursor wouldn't appear.

But, normally nobody cares about determining an NPC, because they are so obvious with just a glance. Unlike flesh and blood humans operating through the Nerve Gear, system controlled NPCs have unique characteristics. Being imprisoned inside SAO for two years, it was a no-brainer to know if other people are a player or an NPC without even thinking —— while I thought about that, my brain re-checked the master of Algade House's gloomy standing pose.

Then, my eyes opened wide in amazement.

"......This is bad, somehow I can't be sure."

".....Right?"

Asuna smiled happily for some reason.

Her smile, which hasn’t changed since we first met, shot through my heart, whenever this happens, I always stretch my hand out dizzily to reach her. But this time, the face of the master that had been floating in my brain prevented my action.

I scratched my head to push that unpleasant image out of my mind.

"No, but is it even possible that someone can't be identified whether they are a player or an NPC? I'm sure there must be a simple way to check it....."

"How about checking his reaction after being attacked? But once we use various reckless methods and he turns out to be a player, we won't be able to go back to that shop anymore. .....Well, at this point, I don't think I want to go back there anyway."

"No, I'm bothered, really bothered."

Asuna quickly shook her head and sighed.

".....Kirito-kun, what on earth do you like about that shop? It's been half a year since you brought me there the first time, I really don't understand....."

"About that, I don't know the reason myself. Unfriendly atmosphere, bad food..... but occasionally I can't resist the urge to try that mystery ramen again."

"That was not ramen though, .....Well, why not just ask? Are you an NPC or a player, like that"

Already having considered Asuna's idea several seconds ago, I shook my head.

"Nope, it won't work. That shopkeeper's unfriendliness is like ten Heathcliffs together. I'm absolutely certain the question will be ignored. Well, that place was also a good place too.

"R..Really, .....just leave it as a mystery then. I'm sorry for starting the weird topic, Do you want more cookies?"

After saying that, Asuna stood up, but I quickly grabbed her left hand and pulled her back.

".....No, I can't leave it."

"Eh?"

"Feeling anxious over and over like this will become unbearable, I can't go back to the front lines until I know whether the shopkeeper is human or NPC."

Upon hearing that, 'Don't say something like that!' was clearly showed in Asuna's expression, but she sat down again without saying it out.

".....But, then what should we do? I don't know any way to confirm it, and asking is also out of the question, right?"

"Nope, there is a way. In short, just seeing the cursor when that master is outside the shop is enough. For a player, he would surely need to go out to buy food ingredients, while NPC also have specific behaviors like cleaning the outside of the shop too."

".....Y..You don't mean..."

Asuna made a stiff face and tried to walk away from the sofa again, but I grabbed both her shoulders and said,

"OK, tomorrow let's go camp there at six in the morning. There is an empty passage across the street, it won't raise any suspicion if we observe from there."

".....It's cold, surely, very cold."

"Yes, we need cold resistant equipment! I'm sure we have enough for both of us in the storage, then the boxed lunch will be made using cold resistance boosting ingredients too. The preparation is now flawless, I'll leave it to you Asuna!"

To my words that gushed out, Asuna made a very complex face then responded with 'Oh~'. But enthusiasm seemed missing from her words for some reason.

Next day.

While it was still dark, wearing thick fur cloaks, we entered our observation position on the pedestrian bridge across from the Algade House's eaves.

Six hours later.

We were forced to retreat after realizing our prospect bore no fruit.

".....He didn't come out at all, did he!"

At an open cafe along the main street, Asuna complained after quickly drinking hot milk and placing the empty cup back on the table.

"Even before that, the sign curtain was left out during the night, and there was no indication of the outside cleaning either. I'm very bothered!"

".....Really sowwy about that."

I first have to apologize on behalf of the shopkeeper.

Algade House's level of lethargy is much higher than anticipated. The shopkeeper never came out to purchase stocks nor clean outside. The only change we observed was the sign plate on the sliding door, which was changed from【Closed】to【Open】at ten. Of course, just that action on its own wasn't enough to determine if he is a player or an NPC.

".....Hmm, but the food ingredients should eventually run out..... Then he surely has to go out to restock....."

After finishing my mumbling, Asuna replied with a sharp glance toward me,

".....Then, do you really want to wait for that to happen? If you think about it, that shop doesn't even have any customers, how many days will it take for the ingredients to run out? I won't be surprised even if it takes several weeks! I'm not going to do that for sure!"

"S..Sorry....."

I apologized again, then thought desperately.

Something——, there must be a way. A way to confirm whether he is a player or not, without him taking a single step out of the shop.

If we're unable to check the person, how about the shop? Is there any way to determine if the shop is a player's shop or an NPC's shop? It would be clearly a player's action if it stood out among the elegant buildings on the street of Salemburg. But this is Algade, the most chaotic town in Aincrad, there were plenty of similar shady shop once we enter the back streets.

——It was no good. Continuing being in the clearing group for two years in this Aincrad, accepting the alias «Black Swordsman», but unable to distinguish whether that person was a player or an NPC. It was such a laughing matter.

A smile of self-ridicule floated to my face, then —— An idea flashed out in my brain.

"T..... That's it!"

".....What?"

In spite of Asuna's skeptic glance toward me, I rattled on,

"If the ingredients won't deplete, then we'll deplete them ourselves! Listen, for NPC restaurants, the term out of stock doesn't exist to begin with, the food just springs out from the kitchen. But a player's shop is different, the shopkeeper has to purchase the stock or else food can't be made. That means....."

At this point Asuna suddenly rose from the table and tried to escape with a dash.

But my focus on increasing Agility stat displayed its results, her hand was grabbed before she made any distance.

"——We just have to eat it! Anything from that shop's menu!"

"Don't wanna! What if it's an NPC restaurant? An infinite amount of food will just come out, won't it?"

"That's that, then we'll know he's an NPC right? Let's go now! The problem is —— Which one to pick from the menu. «Algade Soba», «Algade Grilled», or «Algade Boiled»..... ——Asuna, what do you like?"

Sub-leader of the guild Knights of the Blood, the rapier user whose title was «The Flash» shot her gaze towards me which would be able to pierce a small hole in the middle of my forehead after hearing my question——.

After a short while, she sat back on the chair and said,

"«Boiled» is absolutely out, .....«Grilled» that sometimes contained strange things is also out."

"Then «Soba» it is. Yeah, it is suitable for this challenge too, because it's also what we ate the first time we went there."

".....That's right, but didn't we invite the guild leader as well back then?"

When I seriously tried to recall it, Asuna immediately shook her head.

"It was a joke. ——Then, when are we going to do it?"

I grinned while standing up, and said,

"Isn't it great, we haven't eaten lunch here."

Several minutes later.

Asuna and I were standing in front of the food shop, which will soon be the battlefield of our one-sided duel.

".....Here we go."

After confirming with the nod from my partner—— My left hand pushed aside the dirtied sign curtain, while my right hand forced open the sliding door.

"Welcome."

The usual greeting voice from inside the counter was by none other than the shopkeeper. I sat at the counter instead of my usual table. As soon as Asuna sat down beside me, I made an order.

"Two Algade Soba."

The shopkeeper prepared the bowls without replying, two mysterious balls of noodle were tossed into the large pot. From these action, is was still not possible to confirm whether he was a player or not. After a while, the shopkeeper used the long chopsticks to move the eased up noodle to the bowls, hot water switching, which is required in the real world, seems unnecessary here. He placed a thinly sliced meat, a lump of boiled vegetable, and half a boiled egg, then poured the light colored soup into the bowl.

Two bowls had lined up on the counter, a sound effect rang out when I pulled out the soba from my storage.

Both of us took the chopsticks and said 'Itadakimasu' at the same time. It was the start of the first round of the battle.

In regards to Aincrad cuisine, the taste was recreated from the presets of basic taste data, however, with the addition of seasoning, one can customize the taste even further. For example, the Brown Stew, which is Asuna's pride, was made by slightly mixing the spices set into the taste of ready-made sauce. In other word, with the aid of a player's hand, the flavour of the dish could be strengthened, and in most cases, enriched the taste.

——But it would be quite a miraculous to say the «There is not even one taste» feeling from the Algade Soba was from the aid of the player hand. Even if the flavour of the soup had seasoning added, the strength of the taste was like it had been diluted to a different dimension, it was like a drawing which the background was firmly written but the subject didn't exist.

Maybe what pulled me back to this shop was that missing flavour, for the moment one day that this dish will be «Completed», an ephemeral expectation like that —— But of course, I somehow knew that the moment would never come.

As I was deeply indulged in my thoughts, Asuna, whose face had an expression which could be read as 'Why is this happening to me' was beside me. We finished eating at the same time.

I returned empty bowls back to the counter —— then said,

".....Two Algade Soba, refill!"

There was a slight pause in the shopkeeper's action, but it was probably was just my imagination. The round face of the man in his thirties to forties under the long forelock bore no expression at all, the shopkeeper threw two balls of noodles into the large pot.

From that point on, the endless battle of me and Asuna against the master begun.

Of course, no matter what was eaten in Aincrad, there won't be anything entering the stomach in the body of the real world. But the taste reproduction engine tricks the brain, which lead to an unavoidable feeling of 'full'."

To be honest, that feeling already came after the second bowl had emptied, but there was no path for me to retreat.

"......Two Algade Soba, refill"

This full feeling was only a hallucination, the soba was merely digital data. Which meant there was nothing preventing me from eating these forever.

Having fooled myself like that, I finished the third bowl and proceeded to the fourth bowl. There was also Asuna, whom I could always rely on in the big battle, she was at exactly the same pace as me.

——But immediately after she finished the soup from the fifth bowl,

".....Kirito-kun, I'm sorry."

her faint whisper echoed from the emptied bowl.

"I..can't go any further, I'll have to leave the rest to you..... The truth..you must..find..it....."

Her chestnut color hair fluttered, then «The Flash» collapsed on the counter.

——ASUNAaaaaaaaa——!!

Was what I wanted to scream, but doing that might allow the virtual stomach to reverse something back out, so I limited myself to a short 'GJ'.

I lifted my face and glared at the shopkeeper,

"......One Algade Soba.....refill"

I was also near my limit.

For Asuna's sake, I can't be defeated here. But while sipping from the sixth bowl of something which wasn't ramen, I was unable to stop the fear which sprung out inside me.

——Maybe he was really an NPC? After all we had done, the noodles and the soup still sprung out without any pause. Did I challenge him to a fight in which we had no chance of winning?

——No, even if it's the case, it wasn't the time to fall yet. For Asuna.

Seventh bowl.

Eight bowl.

HP bar of my stomach was now in deep red, but the expression of shopkeeper was still unchanged. I slurpped the noodle one by one, while thinking of a way to reverse the flow of the current battle situation.

If it was a real ramen shop, there would be pepper, fish meals, or onions at the counter. It was possible to eat the latter half deliciously by changing the flavour. But this shop had no such wonderful things. There was only one way, with «Algade Boiled» being an exception, it was possible to mix the other two orders together, but doing that would be the same as stopping oneself by stabbing. Why «Boiled»? I once accompanied Klein and we requested that, we both said 'Give up' just after two mouthfuls, it was menu of the legend.

——So is this the end?

Within my fading consciousness, I heard the reviving voice from a distant memory.

The face of Asuna, who was here eating Algade Soba with me at the beginning, said,

"Someday I want to make a soy sauce, otherwise this unpleasant feeling won't ever disappear."

".....!"

My eyes fully opened, and my trembling hand moved to open our shared storage. Scrolling through the enormous item lists, finding the target item.

Once I grabbed what I was looking for, I tilted it over the bowl, a slightly dark liquid poured down and immediately caused the thin yellow color of the soup to change to brown. The drifting fragrance can't be compared to anything else, the smell that is ingrained at the base of my memory was —— soy sauce. It was the result of Asuna's long research, Aincrad's ultimate seasoning that no one but her could make.

Placing the small bottle down, I held the bowl and sipped large amounts of noodles and soup.

".....This is it."

I murmured with a hoarse voice. It was this taste. The one I was looking for, the completed form of Algade Soba. It had arrived here and now.

If eating this, then no matter how many bowls —— No, maybe I can eat five more bowls, I still can fight!

————At that time.

The words I have never heard within this shop before echoed from overhead.

".....Mister, that, taste it.....can I?"

I raised my confused face, nodded and pushed the bowl to him.

The mystery master grabbed it up and ate the mouthful of noodles and soup together. He looked up for a while after placing the bowl back on the counter——

Soon after that, two lines of tears flowed from behind his long forelock.

".....This is it. This taste... real world's... my shop's taste!"

————So you are a player after all!

————Then act more graciously!

Swallowing what I wanted to scream, I asked,

".....Your shop, where is it located?"

"Hmm, It was at Ogikubo, I got sucked into NetGame so it went out of business. But once the game is cleared and I go back to the other side, I'm going to open a ramen shop again. With this ramen, also «Grilled» and «Boiled» will make the appearance too, come by all means."

Tears still flowing down his face, where was that silent character earlier? While watching the shopkeeper who had gained momentum talking, I collapsed onto the counter.

As my consciousness was fading, My last thought was,

————I won't go, absolutely————

ME-07

# Continuation: Aria in the Starless Night

Aincrad 2nd Floor
4th December 2022

# Continuation: Aria in the Starless Night

Aincrad's 2nd floor's main town «Urbus» was a town located inside a table mountain that spanned three hundred meters in diameter, which had been dug up and left with only the outer circumference.

Once I had gone through the southern gate, the words [INNER AREA] floated up into my vision, and the slow tempo of the town's BGM started playing. Unlike the music led by string instruments in the town of the first floor, the main theme here was played with a sorrowful oboe tone. The NPCs passing by also had subtle changes in the design of their garments, giving a『So this is a new floor』feel.

After walking about ten meters from the gate, I started looking at my surroundings. I couldn't see any green cursor which indicated players at all, but that was only natural. That was because the guardian of the stairs to the second floor, the first floor labyrinth's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was just defeated forty minutes previously, and every members of the boss-capturing party aside from me had returned to the base.

In other words, on this vast second floor, the only existing player was just me —— the «Former β tester» and now the «Beater», Kirito.

Although that was the case, this situation wouldn't continue for much longer. That was because exactly two hours after the floor boss' annihilation, the «Transfer Gate» at the center of the main town of the next floor (which was this Urbus) would be automatically [Activated], connecting it to the main town on the lower floors. At that time, the waiting players would spill over from the gate like a flood.

Conversely, if I wished to, I could spend the remaining hour and twenty minutes monopolizing this town —— as I could clear a few [Slaughter] quests, which I normally had to compete with other players for the [POP], two or three times. It was a very attractive idea to a solo player who ultimately advocated self-interest, however, I didn't have enough courage to seriously anger the several hundreds..... or possibly thousands of people who were eagerly awaiting the activation of the gate.

Therefore, I started jogging along Urbus' main street which went straight towards the north, ascended the wide stairs before arriving at the town square, and finally started walking toward the large gate set up in the center.

It was called a gate, but it was actually just an arch made of neatly stacked up stones. Without a door nor any bars, there was nothing to block the view of its other side. However, upon getting closer, I noticed a faint distortion of the empty space in the middle of the arch, as if seeing through a thin film of water.

As I looked around at the surroundings, confirming an escape route, my right hand stretched slowly towards the swaying transparent veil. The fingertip, which was wrapped by a black leather glove, touched the surface of the water, which spread vertically —— at that moment,

*Pa*, a dazzling blue light overflowed, and shot into my eyes.

The pulsing light spread in circles within the five-meters-wide arch. Once it had filled the entire space, it would be the opening of the Transfer Gate, the so-called «Town Opening». However, I turned around without watching this majestic phenomenon. As asserted beforehand, I started a fierce dash to a building, which looked like a church, to the east of the square. After jumping into the entrance and ascending the stairs inside, I put my back at the side of the window on the third floor, and looked down upon the square.

Just then, the inside of the gate shone brightly, and the NPC orchestra stationed at the corner of the square started playing a loud «Opening Fanfare».

After a moment, a rapid stream of numerous players spilled out from the blue light of the gate.

Some people stood inside the square while looking around. Others ran off with a leather map from the information dealer in one hand. And —— there were people who raised their fists and shouting "I'm on the second floor————!!"

During the β Test, there was a total of nine «Town Openings», the scene during those times, of course, was the lines of the raid party members who had defeated the previous floor's boss being bathed in the generous applause and admiration from the players from the lower floors. However, this time the only person who was the «Opener» had already escaped, so the event didn't occur. There was a group of people who were restlessly looking for me, but unfortunately, they wouldn't be able to find my name there.

Why? Several dozen minutes earlier, after defeating the boss, I had made an announcement in front of more than forty raid members that I, «Kirito», wasn't just a mere β Tester. That, I had reached the highest level among the thousand testers, and had accumulated the most knowledge of the game. And that, I was a «Beater». I didn't want to act so nasty, but it was partly a reaction to avert the hostility from the new players to the former testers; and as a result, currently, my infamy had spread among the highest leveled players at an ultra-high-speed. If I went out of my hiding place, far from receiving congratulatory remarks, it wouldn't be strange to hear boos and jeers. Then, I wasn't confident that I would be able to remain calm like a willow in the wind in that situation.

Therefore, I would have to continue hiding on the third floor of the church until the commotion in the square died down. ——However,

"......Huh?"

I murmured quietly after seeing an unusual event at the square down below.

A female player who had just warped out of the Transfer Gate did not stop, but continued dashing towards the western side of the town. If it was just that, it could be seen as hurrying to the weapon shop or the quest starter NPC, but the problem was the two men who came out of the gate right after her. They took a moment to look around, and once they had spotted the girl, they started rushing toward the same direction. From the look of it, it was «Two guys chasing a girl».

Normally I wouldn't poke my head out and get involved, as this place was within the effective area of the Anti-Criminal Code, but since the one being chased was my acquaintance, the story had changed. Because the one with the golden-brown curly hair and plain leather equipment was the information dealer, «Argo the Rat», there was no mistaking it.

'Selling every information that could be sold', there certainly were people who hated this motto of The Rat, but I couldn't be calmly chasing after them in middle of town in this appearance. After hesitating for a moment, I placed my feet on the frame of the church's window and jumped down onto the roof just below. I quickly dashed with my agility-focused parameter before the players at the square could notice me, and jumped to the roof of the nearby building. I kept going without dropping down to the ground,

aiming to the direction Argo and the two guys went. It was possible to do so due to the consistent height of the buildings in Urbus.

I waved my right hand's finger while I was running and called out the main window. After clicking «Tracking» from the skill tab, I selected «Pursuit» on the floated up sub-menu. When I entered the name [Argo] into the input window, pale green illuminated footprints appeared on the road stretching to the right on my lower right vision.

«Pursuit» was a higher skill that could be learned after the proficiency of «Tracking» had increased, this skill which was normally used to raise effectiveness while hunting monsters could also be used to pursue a player whose name is known. However, as my proficiency was still low, the footprints that could be seen were from a minute ago. I hastily chased after the disappearing lines of small shoe soles.

Argo's focus was on speed (AGI), so for her to be unable to shake off the chasing two guys, they must not be ordinary players. Although I didn't see them among the boss raid, their levels should be top-class. In addition, the footprints that went straight along the road toward the west, had exit to the outside through the city gate which was dug out of the outer rim of the crater. These western plains of Urbus was a dangerous map with large buffalo type monsters roaming about. The situation was getting worse. I bit my lips and rushed into the virtual savanna without stopping my feet.

The wasteland beyond this savanna was still quite risky for my current level to enter alone. But fortunately, the footprints engraved on the thicket were getting more vivid (in other words, Argo had already stopped running), from inside the valley between two small rocky mountains, a familiar voice could be heard.

".....imes I'll still be saying the same-daro! Just this information, no matter how much you offer, I won't sell it-da!"

That coquettish nasal covering the end of the sentence was obviously Argo's voice, but it had thirty percent more intimidating than usual. It was then followed by a sharp voice of a man.

"You aren't going to keep it to yourself, but also don't want to share it to the public. Doesn't that mean you want to jack up the price-gozaru?"

————*Gozaru?* I frowned as I stopped my feet before climbing up the nearby cliff. In SAO, by using brain and stubbornness, there were many ways to get through the terrain which looked impossible to trespass at first glance. My ambition was, one day, I want to try climbing the outer wall of this floating castle to reach the next floor. But at the moment, the reason I was climbing this mountain to get into their blind spot wasn't for challenge, but for my own safety.

After climbing up for about five meters and reaching a flat, narrow surface, I continued to crawl forward. The general source of the quarrel was right below at that moment.

"It's not a problem about price-yo! Didn't I tell you I don't want to be blamed after I sold the information-da!!"

The voice of the second man then retorted Argo's words,

"Why would we blame you!? No matter what price you ask, we'd still be saying gratitudes-gozaru!! So just sell us the information about the quest hidden on this floor —— the acquisition quest for the «Extra Skill» already!!"

.....*Huh?*

I completely stopped the breath I was suppressing. Those extra skills that wouldn't appear in the skill tree unless some special conditions were met, the so-called «Hidden Skills». The only one I discovered during the β period was «Meditation», a mental concentration skill (the pose looked like so) that increased the rate of HP recovery and reduced the remaining time of negative statuses. However, due to its low efficiency and lame pose, not many players took it. The other was the «Katana» extra skill, which was used by the Kobold Lord and samurai type monsters on the tenth floor, but I still didn't know its prerequisites.

In any case, I was certain that the topic between Argo and the two mysterious gozaru guys wasn't the «Meditation» skill, as the NPC giving this skill was on the sixth floor. That meant, there was a flag quest to unlock an extra skill that I still didn't know of (also equaled to all former β testers not knowing about it) on this second floor, and these gozaru guys were trying to make Argo sell the information —— something like that?

Once I had reached that conclusion, the volume of the guys' voice increased.

"Today, we will absolutely pull it off for sure-gozaru!"

"We'll certainly do anything necessary to complete that extra skill-gozaru!"

"You guys just won't understand-na—! No matter what you say, I won't sell that information-goza..... oops, I won't sell it-dayo!!"

*Piri*— the voltage of the tension in the air seemed to have increased a step higher —— the moment I thought so, I stood up on the stone ledge and jumped to the ground five meters below. I landed in the middle between Argo and the two guys. In order to receive no damage for jumping from that height while still lacking in the agility parameter, I bent my knees and took a defensive posture to absorb the impact damage before quickly standing up.

"——Who are you-gozaru!?"

"Spy from another clan!?"

Just when I saw the shape of the gozaru guys, who were shouting at the same time, a corner of my memories was intensely stimulated. Their entire body were in dark grey cloth armor. It seemed they wore light chain mails on their upper bodies. The weapons on their back were small sized scimitars. On their heads were bandana caps and the pirate masks of the same grey color. Overall looking, it was the so-called «Ninja» appearance, which was originality and ingenuity reproduced.

"Hmm, eeh..... you guys are probably, Fu, Fuu.....Food, no, Fooga, but that also doesn't sound right....."

"It's Fūma-gozaru!!"

"We are Kotarou and Isuke from the guild «Fūmaningun»-gozaru!!"

"Oh, that's it!"

I snapped my right fingers in satisfaction as they had helped supplementing my memory. These two were the members of the ridiculously fastest ninja guild which was feared during the β test period. I should make a note about what was feared first. Every member were just like Argo and focused their parameter on agility, they would open the battle as the front row and used their AGI wall to confuse the enemy. When it became

dangerous, they would use their dashing power to flee, forcing the monster to target nearby parties instead. No matter how I thought about them, they were clearly a group of evil shinobi.

But I didn't know these guys were still going along the ninja path even after SAO official service turned into a death game, which by itself (so far), I had no complaints. However, two vs one, chasing Argo, a female player, and forcefully getting information from her, was a different story.

I made a gesture for Argo, who was behind me, to step back, and moved my finger to the grip of my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hung on my back, as I said,

"As a secret agent of the government, I can't overlook this misdeed of the Fūma ninja..."

At that moment——

Under the fake ninja cowls, eyes of Kotarou-shi and Isuke-shi shone brightly together.

""You bastard, are you from Iga!?""

"Hah!?"

Apparently, the speech which I thought was appropriate to the mood seemed to have pressed their important switch. Their right hands started to reach, in perfect synchronization, for the ninja katanas on their back (which were actually the small sized scimitars).

*No way —— are they really unsheathing? But here is the «Outside» with no Anti-Criminal Code, where Players can attack other players and HP would decrease for real. At the same time, the color cursor of the attacking side would turn orange, indicating a «Criminal» status, preventing them from entering towns. Even if they were ninja, they wouldn't be able to deceive the eyes of the «Cardinal System» controlling this world.*

*Should I say I'm not Iga but Koga? But would that help avoiding the problem?* As I was seriously pondering these ridiculous thoughts——

The solution to the situation came from an unexpected direction.

A while ago, in order to listen to the conversation between Argo and these ninja, I didn't stop at the entrance of this small valley but instead struggled to climb up the cliff. The reason was, this place wasn't in the middle of the town but a field. If one were to stand still in one place, sooner or later, one thing would surely happen.

As I slowly stepped backward, I said in a low voice,

"Behind you."

""Do you think we will fall for that trick-gozaru!?""

"There's no trick, just look behind you."

Something within my voice seemed to have moved the deep skepticism of the ninja. Kotarou and Isuke, who turned their faces around, made a slight jump at the same time. That was because in front of their eyes and noses, a new intruding person —— no, an intruding cow was standing tall. Its formal name was «Trembling Ox». The height to its shoulders would be about two and a half meters, it was a huge cow type monster, specialty of the second floor. While its toughness and attack power were just as expected from its appearance, what was troublesome was actually its terribly long targeting range and duration, which made it very hard to switch targets mid-fight. Since I had already retreated to the ledge, there was no doubt that its target would be none other than those guys.

"Bumoooo————!!"

The cow howled,

""Go.....gozaruuuuu!!""

Which followed by the screams of the ninja. Right after that, the two bodies in ninja outfits started running at an amazing speed in the direction of the town. The cow also chased after them with an agility that did not match its huge body. It was only five seconds before the earth's tremor and the screams disappeared into the horizon. From the look of it, the chase would continue until Kotarou and Isuke entered Urbus.

I, who had somehow avoided the outburst of a big battle against those super ninja, let out my breath while looking over my appearance. Up until an hour ago, I have been

dressed in a very plain dark grey leather coat over a cotton shirt and black leather pants. But the unique equipment I obtained as a drop from the Kobold Lord, the boss of the first floor, the «Coat of Midnight» which I equipped on the spot, along with my eyes and hair color, had made my whole body look pitch black. I think it was valid that I was given the title «Dirty Beater», but at the same time, I somehow looked ninja-like as well. *From now on, it would be unbearable if the "Kirito is from Iga." rumour is spread out, should I at least change the inner color?* —— was what I thought.

Again, an unexpected event occurred.

Two small arms stretching from behind embraced me tightly. I could feel a soft and warm sense of touch on my back, along with a faint whisper,

".....You're pretty cool-yo, Kiri-bou."

That voice was, of course, from Argo who was staying silent until this moment. However, the tone of her voice was subtly different from the «Rat»'s usual slightly hateful tone——

"But something like that, isn't it breaking the first rule of Onee-san, the information dealer?"

*.....O-Onee-san? .....The rules of the information dealer?*

Those words provoked my curiosity, but the situation wasn't something to which I, a second-year middle school gamer who had zero intercommunication skill until a month ago, could make a correct reaction. I desperately thought while I was freezing, and somehow managed to push the words out of my mouth,

".....You owe me one anyway. I'll be troubled until you tell me the reason behind your whiskers."

On the face of the information dealer, Argo the «Rat», there were three lines of whiskers on each cheeks clearly drawn in black makeup. While those were the source of her Rat nickname, no one knew the reason behind why she drew them. And a terrible price tag of hundred thousands of coll was attached to that information.

However, in the boss battle earlier, I took a «Beater» label to isolate myself from most of the former β testers, single-handedly taking the hostility from the new players off the former testers including Argo. In order to express her gratitude, Argo sent a message saying that I could «Get any single information for free», to which I replied «Tell me the reason for your whiskers».

To my words that I used as a joke to divert the situation, Argo pressed her face harder on my back as she whispered,

".....Okay-yo, I'll tell you-ru. But you need to wait a bit while I take off the makeup-ra....."

*Eh?*

*Makeup..... does it mean taking those whiskers off? Does she intend to show me the face without makeup which no one had seen before? Does it have some deep implication?*

As my mental burden had increased to the crisis level, Argo exclaimed before she separated her body from me,

".....Thinking again, I'll change the information I'm telling! I'll tell you about about the skill hidden on this floor!!"

Argo took her face away from my back and turned in front of me, fortunately —— it should be said like that, the whiskers still clearly remained on her cheeks. Just before her face left my back, 'Kii-bou, you coward,' I felt like I heard something like that, but it must be my imagination.

The «Rat», who had completely returned to her usual cheeky expression, said while folding her arms,

"I said I'll tell you any information, so I'll keep my promise-yo. But, Kii-bou also have to promise me one thing-shiro. Regardless of the outcome, don't blame me-na!"

".....Just now, you also said that to those ninja. But, what does that mean? For you to sell the information about an extra skill no one knows, wouldn't they feel grateful instead of a grudge.....?"

To my question, the Rat showed a broad grin.

"To answer that, I'll need to take yours as a payment-yo, Kii-bou."

I leaked out a sigh as I nodded.

"Alright, I promise. I swear to the god..... no, to Cardinal-sama, that no matter what happens, I won't hold a grudge against you."

Whether the quest to acquire the extra skill could pose a risk to my life, I would have to judge it by myself. After hearing my oath, Argo gave a deep nod, 'Now follow me-na,' before turning around.

For the path we took from there, I felt it would be impossible to travel along without having bought a map beforehand, or having unlimited amounts of curiosity and endurance. We clambered the cliff of the table mountains standing close together on the vast —— the diameter shouldn't be different from the first floor —— second floor, got into a small cave, and glided along the underground stream like it was a waterslide. We went through three battles, but the enemies weren't difficult to me, who was leveling to the limit in order to defeat the first floor's boss. The total time of our traveling was about thirty minutes.

Judging by our position on the whole map, we had arrived at a place near the summit of an exceptionally high towering mountain on the southern edge of the second floor. That place was a small clearing surrounded by cliffs, with a spring and a lone tree, also —— a small hut was built there.

".....Is it here?"

Argo nodded at my unnecessary question before walking to the hut without hesitation. It seemed there was still no danger at this stage. She then forcefully opened the door.

There was an NPC inside, along with some furniture. It was a big middle-aged man with a well built body, his head was a slick skinhead, and around his mouth was a thick beard. Over his head was a gold-colored [**?**] mark, indicating a quest starting point.

To my questioning gaze, Argo gave a nod again.

"This guy is the NPC giving the «Martial Arts» extra skill-yo. The information I can give is up until this point, accepting the quest or not, is Kii-bou's decision-na."

"......M-Martial arts?"

It was a name that I had never heard during the β period. Argo said 'This is service-yo,' before adding supplementary information.

"«Martial Arts» is a skill that allows attacking with bare hands..... that is my speculation. It would be effective when the weapon is dropped, or its durability is at the limit-na."

"O-Oh..... then it would be useful, unlike «Meditation». In that case..... I see, so that's why you got stuck with those ninja at that place....."

To Argo, who had ? written on her face, I also gave a 'This is service,' preface before giving an explanation.

"When speaking about ninja, normally you would imagine their weapons to be ninja katana and shuriken, but it was a bit different in game industry. Removing the head with a single bare hand attack. That has been the highest peak of ninja gaming style for a long time. So Kotarou and Isuke would want that martial arts skill in order to make their ninja being «Complete». ——No, but... wait a sec. They didn't know this place, then how did they know about the content of the martial arts skill and Argo knowing that information?"

"This is service of the service-yo. Just before the end of the β test, this information was revealed from an NPC on the seventh floor, regarding «The martial arts master on the second floor»-da. But I found it out myself long before that-na. Those ninja should have heard about it from the NPC on the seventh floor during the β-sa. Then, ever since this official server launched, they have kept asking me to sell the information about the extra skill on the second floor-da."

"T.....Then, why don't you just say『I don't know』at that time? So they wouldn't keep haunting you like that....."

To my expected question, Argo made an awkward face as she said,

".....That single『I don't know』would destroy my pride as an information dealer."

".....So you chose to say『I know but won't sell it』, huh. Well..... it's not like I can't understand your feelings....."

As I let out a sigh, I looked at the NPC setup in seated Zen meditation over a tatami-mat in the middle of the hut again.

".....And, the reason you won't sell is that the one who bought it would hold a grudge against you. But even saying so, don't you already have a lot of enemies due to your business.....?"

"People usually forget the grudge from having bought information just after three days-sa! But this guy is different-da! Even if it turns out to be lame, you still have to keep it for your whole life-yo....."

Watching small body of Argo trembling, I was lost for several seconds before giving a nod.

"I already knew I'd need to experience it by myself anyway. So it's fine, I promise. No matter what the outcome, I won't blame Argo."

I then walked into the hut and stood in front of the old man who was sitting in Zen meditation. The old man in a rugged Tao outfit looked at me before saying,

"Thou wishes to be a disciple?"

".....Yes."

"Even though there be a long and steep road of training?"

"I'm expecting no less."

After a short conversation, the [**?**] above the head of the old man changed into [**!**], the log in my vision indicated that the quest was accepted.

The old man, who became my master, moved outside the hut, toward a huge rock at the edge of the garden, which was surrounded by cliffs. Its height was about two meters, with a diameter of about one and a half meters, the master lightly knocked it and spoke while he was stroking his beard with his left hand,

"Thine training is just one. Splitting this rock using only thy palms. Once thou have succeeded, I shall teach thee all my knowledge."

".....W-Wait a bit."

I tapped lightly on the huge rock, feeling a little nervous about this unexpected development. Since I was accustomed to the game, my sense of touch could tell the degree of the target's durability. The hardness sensation that was transmitted to my hand was just one step short of «Immortal Object».

*Yeah, it's impossible.*

I made that judgement and turned to the master to cancel the quest. However, before I could do so——

"Until this rock is split, leaving this mountain is forbidden. And thou hast to demonstrate it in front of me."

The master who spitted out that line took strange objects from the bosom of his Tao outfit. On his left hand was a small pot. Then in his right hand was... a thick and elegant —— writing brush.

Bad feeling, a word made up in a 3D font floated over my head as the bad feeling pierced through my entire body.

*E-Err, I want to quit!*

Faster than I could say that, the right hand of the master flashed at an amazing speed. The tip of the brush plunged into the pot, a lot of ink then —— *Zubazubazuba—!* exploded on my face.

At that moment, this made me realize the secret behind Argo's whiskers.

That girl had discovered the old man from the early stage of the β test and had accepted the quest. Upon accepting it, she was told to split the same rock, and at the same time, the graffiti was written on her face. Those —— three whiskers on each cheek.

"O-Owaaaa!?"

I raised a pathetic scream as I leaned back, and met with the gaze from Argo who was standing slightly further away. The girl showed deep sorrow and sympathy —— but at the same time, the expression on the Rat's face looked as if she was trying to suppress the urge to burst into laughter.

I hurriedly used both of my hands to wipe my face after the release of the brush attack. However, the ink seemed to be a super-fast drying type, as I couldn't get anything on my hands. The master looked at me like that before nodding, and spitting out the shocking words that I was expecting,

"That «Mark» cannot be removed until thou hath split this rock and finished the training. I believe in thee, my disciple."

Then, he returned to the hut and disappeared behind the door.

I stood still like that for about ten seconds, before gazing at Argo, who was still wearing a faint expression, and asked,

"I see..... Argo, you accepted this quest during the β period..... and gave up on clearing it, right? That's why you had to continue playing with that drawing on your face until the final day of the test. And as the result, it was the beginning of the «Rat» character, the information dealer, and for your business in the game's official version, you chose to continue using it with makeup..... is that correct?"

"Excellent! That's an excellent reasoning-yo!"

As she clapped her hands, the Rat continued,

"Isn't it great-na, Kii-bou! As a result, you gained the information of both «The reason behind the whiskers» and «The extra skill»-na! For celebration, I'll tell you one more thing-yo. This rock..... it's a demon-dayo!"

".....I thought so..."

While I was bearing the urge to collapse to the ground, I bet on my small ray of hope as I asked Argo,

".....Hey. Is the one on my face similar to your whiskers?"

"Hmm, it's quite different-na—"

"Oh..... h-how does it look!?"

*Maybe it isn't too noticeable? Or if it's noticeable but is somewhat cool then I still have a choice of returning to my daily life while carrying this mark.* Argo spent three seconds looking at my face, who didn't have enough courage to look at my own reflection from the spring, —— before saying,

"Oh right-na. I can express it in one word..... it's «Kiriemon»-na."

At that point, seeming as she had reached her limit, Argo fell to the ground, both feet wriggled while she rolled her body about, "Nyahahaha! Nya—hahahahaha!!" she continued laughing uncontrollably. Eternally, eternally...

I secluded myself on the mountain for three days and nights, by then, I managed to split the rock after a tremendous amount of struggle. It was fortunate that I had promised not to hold a grudge against Argo.

(End)

ME-08

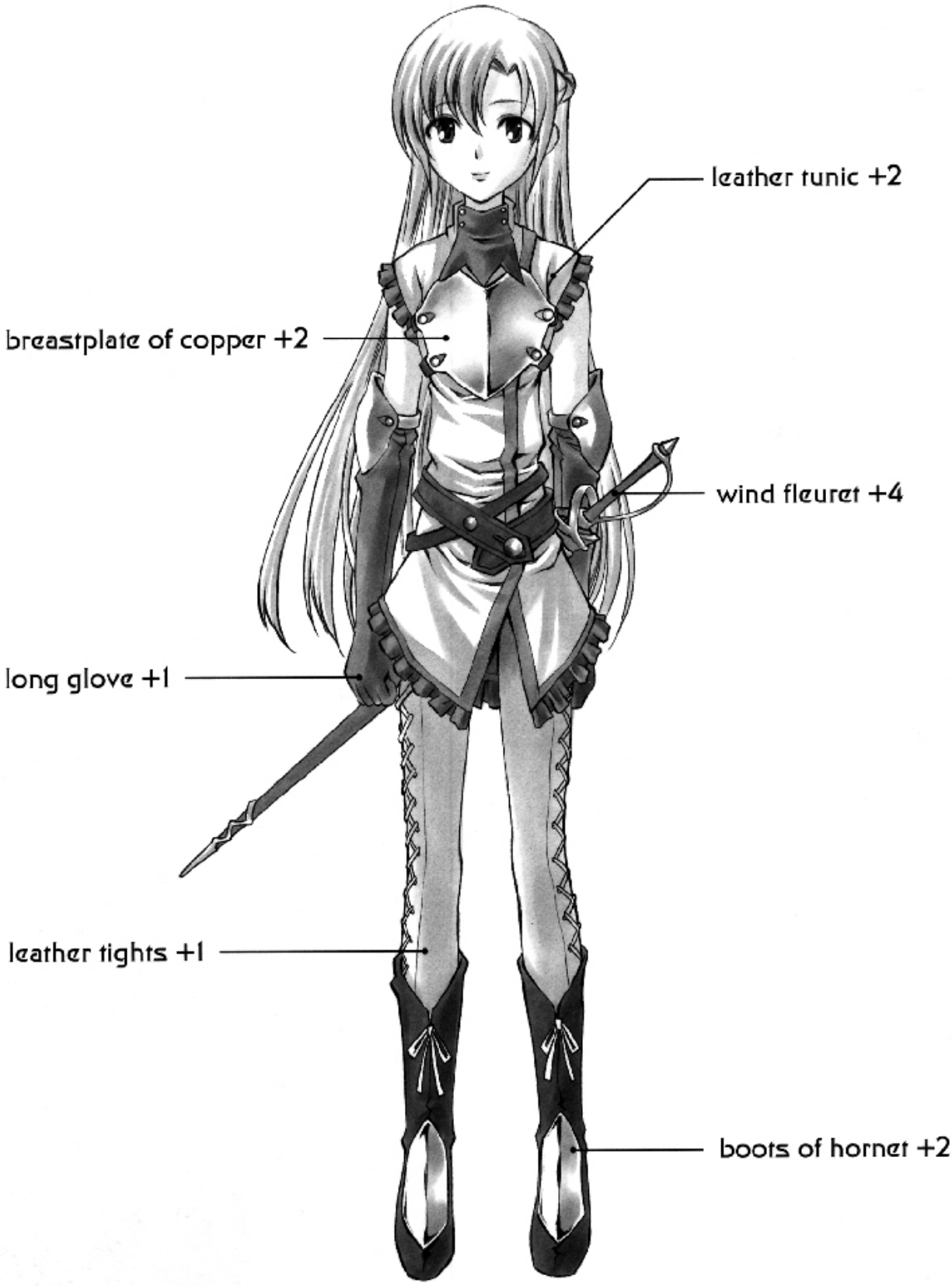
# *Rondo of the Transient Sword*

*first chapter*

§ Aincrad 2nd Floor
8th December 2022

SWORD ART ONLINE

# ソードアートオンライン マテリアルエディション
# 8




SWORD ART ONLINE : MATERIAL EDITION 8

"Don't.....Don't, don't joke with me!!"

As a screaming echo resounded in my path, I stopped moving my feet.

As my footsteps went *su-su-su*, and I attached myself to the wall of the NPC store behind me, I peeked at the situation in front of me. In front of the road was a wide square, and the commotion seemed to come from that direction.

"Re-Return!! Return it to the original state!! It was a plus 4..... ch-change it back to the original!!"

Once again, the scream resounded. It looked as though it was trouble between two players. However, since we were inside the city's «crime prevention boundary» —— in the middle of Aincrad's second floor's main city «Urbus», both players could not actually harm each other, and there was no actual need for me to sneakily hide.

However, although I understood that in my head, I still had no choice but be thirty percent more cautious than usual. This was because, I, the level 13 one-handed sword user Kirito, am now Aincrad's most despised solo player..... because I am «The first person known as a beater».

8th December 2022, Thursday, thirty two days after the Death Game SAO started.

Four days had quickly passed after the first floor's boss monster «Illfang the Kobold Lord» was defeated, and Urbus' transition gate had been activated.

And in those four days, the events that transpired in the first floor's boss room was spread and exaggerated to every player on the front lines. Knowledge like the Boss monster having Katana Skills not being included in the prior information. The Raid Party's leader, the «Knight» Diabel's death. As well as, the person who had reached floors higher than anyone else in the beta period, and obtained knowledge by defeating the boss there, the person who obtained the last attack bonus, the «Beater».

Fortunately —— it could be said like this, although Kirito's name was widely spread, there should only be about forty players who knew what the avatar looked like. And in this SAO, irrelevant information like the names of people who had no relation to you

would not show alongside the cursor. Therefore, even if I walk along the street and threw stones at them it would be alright. Well, if I threw stones at them the purple system barrier would probably temporarily block it.

Still, just to be on the safe side, the first floor's boss rare drop «Coat of Midnight» armor was unequipped, then tied a bandana on my forehead, making myself look unimportant. The reason for me to disguise myself in order to sneak into the main district city was not to see someone, but to get potions, food supplies and equipment maintenance that was necessary. About three kilometres southeast from here was the small village of «Marome», but its shops lacked variety in its wares, and furthermore there was no NPC blacksmith.

Due to those concerns, after my storage was first filled with loads of supplies, and I was walking down the street to complete my next errand, when the cry earlier reached my ears ―― this was the reason.

After I had confirmed that the jeer, "Don't joke with me", was not directed at me in any way, I gave off a sigh, relaxed my guard, and continued to walk towards my destination which also happened to be the source of commotion at the eastern square of Urbus.

In less than a minute, I reached a low, circular open space in the shape of a mortar. Although it would normally be crowded at 3 pm. or the so called «Raid time», but as it was only a few days after the opening of the district, there were probably many players from «Starting City» who were touring the place.

These people stopped at the corner of the square, while there was a stammering cry similar to the previous one could be heard on the opposite end. I approached the crowd and slipped through the gaps, stretching my neck in order to know the reason for the commotion.

"W-Wh-Why is it like this!! The property unreasonably decreased!!"

The bright red face of the man who was yelling looked vaguely familiar. It was not a tourist, but a player who should be on the front lines. Although he did not take part in the first floor's raid battle, his level was reasonably high, based on the metal armor and three large horns on the helmet he wore.

Even more attention grabbing than that, the three horned man's right hand tightly held an unsheathed one-handed straight sword. Within the boundary it was impossible to hurt someone with that blade, but brandishing it in a crowd was still a little disturbing. However, the man with blood rushing through his head continued to pound the tip of the sword into the stony ground and shouted,

"Why did I get four consecutive failures! Plus zero is unlikely, if it's like this isn't an NPC Blacksmith better! Take responsibility, you shitty blacksmith!!"

―― Being furiously scolded for a few minutes, despite giving a troubled expression, standing upright and remaining silent, was a plain brown leather apron wearing male player with a small stature.

A corner of the square was covered in a grey carpet, and placed above, on the narrow empty space was a chair and an anvil, and also a display shelf. That carpet was called a «Vendor's Carpet», and was by no means cheap, as it was a necessary item to put on a streets of the city to make a simple player's shop, essential for a novice merchant player. Of course, even without the carpet one could sell items, but the durability of the items left alone would decrease bit by bit, and you had to be wary of your wares being stolen. During the beta test period, the main streets of the main district city of each layer was bustling with merchants with various wares spread out on the carpets, but this was the first time I saw a carpet like this in the official service of SAO which had turned into a death game. No, even more than that, it was the first time I saw a blacksmith which was not an NPC but a player.

Based on this situation, I finally realized the reason for the commotion.

The sword that was being pounded into the ground while the man shouted had probably been «Enhanced» by the downcast blacksmith. In general, a player's success rate was higher than that of an NPC at the same level, the related skill's mastery had to be raised solidly, but this could only be seen to some degree based on the appearance of the objects. Production based skills required tools ―― for a blacksmith, the «Blacksmith's Hammer» series was needed ―― which determined the equipment depending on the proficiency, but the set requirements were very subtle. At this moment, atop the anvil in front of the depressed blacksmith a few meters from me was the «Iron Hammer» which had a higher skill requirement than this city's blacksmith NPC used the «Bronze Hammer».

In other words, that Blacksmith's success rate of enhancing should be higher than that of the NPC's, if it were otherwise his business would not be feasible, which was probably why the three horned man had entrusted him with his beloved sword.

―― However. Unfortunately, in SAO, unless the proficiency of skill was greater than the margin, the chances of enhancing the weapon was not a hundred percent. For example, if it had a thirty percent chance of failure, then the chances of two consecutive failures would be nine percent, and three consecutive failures would be three percent, and finally the tragic four consecutive failures would be possible at 0.8 percent probability.

The surprising thing in the world of online games was, this degree of numbers was assuredly an «Event that would occasionally occur». In a title I had played previously, items with a drop rate set to 0.01 percent that made you want to cry "That's ridiculous" existed, but there were some really lucky players that actually got the item. I could not help but wish that this kind of devilish rarity does not appear in SAO, but surely it did exist, and I would then live in a dungeon seeking it.....

".....What's all this commotion about"

A sudden whisper came from my right, beside me, surprising me as I looked at the source.

Standing there was a fine slender body of a FencerRapier User, wearing a white leather tunic, pale green leather tights, with a silver colored breast plate covering her chest. A player might mistake her for an elf which should not exist in Aincrad, although her clean and clear outfit's impression was ruined by an unfashionable gray wool cape from her head to her waist. Although this could not be helped. If she took of the cape, her glossy long chestnut hair, as well as that elf like appearance would be revealed, and the surrounding tourists would not leave her alone.

I took a very deep breath to calm my mind, one of the few people in this world.....in fact, there were only five people whom I could call «friend», and told her.

"It looks like, that three horned-kun's sword enhancing had....."

As my mouth uttered those words, I remembered that I was disguised, similar to the girl beside me. My black coat was replaced with a rustic leather armor, and my head was

covered by a yellow and blue striped bandanna, disguising my body thoroughly, and I did not want to think that it was easily seen through. If that is the case, then for now I should respond under the guise of a first meeting.

"......ah, that, umm.....Have I seen you somewhere before?"

As soon as I had said that, from within the grey hood, two rapier sharp eyes attacked me with a horizontal penetrating look, directly piercing the area between my eyebrows.

"Instead of merely having met, I remember that we had a meal together and had even teamed up as a party."

".....ah, I remembered. Now I remembered. I even remembered that I lent you the bath at my place."

*Gash*. The long boots ―― named «Boots of Hornet» had its sharp heels embedded in my right foot and exploded, and some of my memories were lost.

I coughed *ehem* and cleared my throat, and pinched the edges of the rapier user's hood with my fingertips, and dragged her to a place a few meters away where there was no one around, before greeting her again.

"Y-Yo, Asuna. Long time no see.....not really, two days no see."

"Good afternoon, Kirito-kun."

In any case, I had told her when we met two days ago to drop the «-kun» honorific since this was an avatar. However, it seems the VR game beginner still did not give up using it for some reason. If that was the case, then I should use «Asuna-san» to address her, but when I attempted it she replied with "It's too troublesome, so don't bother", it's really hard to understand a girl's heart.

In any case, I somehow managed to peacefully greet her, and waved to draw her attention toward the commotion at the blacksmith's stall which was still in full swing, and gave a brief description.

"That commotion is apparently, the three horned helmet's sword was given to the blacksmith to be enhanced, and it failed four times in a row, so it became plus zero,

which made his blood rush to his head. Well.....I understand his feelings though.....four consecutive failures."

Then, the person I knew to be Aincrad's fastest and calmest (I wanted to add the most beautiful here, but omitted it to prevent conflict with the harassment code) player, the rapier user Asuna, shrugged and commented.

"If there is a possibility of failure, this person should be informed. That blacksmith-san, didn't he already put up a list of the success rate for each type of weapon in his store. Furthermore, if the enhancing failed he only has to bear the costs of the item materials, and not the reforging fee."

"Eh, really? That's really honest of him....."

The earnest blacksmith player continued to look down, and I remembered what he had muttered. Indeed, although forty percent of me sympathised with that three horned man, after hearing these words and numbers it dropped to twenty percent.

".....Perhaps, at the first failure, his blood rushed to his head, and he asked for it to be enhanced once more. That hotness and sadness always comes together with gambling....."

"That was a comment filled with feeling."

"N-No, It's merely a general assessment."

Here, the seventh floor during the beta test period had a monster arena which gave all properties satisfaction, but if I talked openly about the experience it might not only **not** increase her impression of me, but decrease it instead, so based on this intuition, I looked away. Asuna gave a look of suspicion for a few seconds, fortunately she returned to the topic.

".....Well, even I don't think it is not pitiful, but there's no need for such excitement.....as long as he saves money for the materials, he can try again, right."

"Emm.....no, trying again is not possible."

"Why is that?"

As Asuna tilted her head, I thumbed at my beloved sword «Anneal Blade +6» hanging on my back as I commented.

"That three horn's sword is the same «Anneal Blade» as mine. Surely, he had also cleared the difficult quest on the first floor. Then, he brought it to a blacksmith NPC to enhance it to a +4. Well, up to that point success is really simple. However at +5 the probability of success would significantly drop, and the player blacksmith was requested to do it. However, the first attempt failed, so the number decreased to +3. Then he was asked to enhance it again to regain what was lost, but once again it failed and dropped to +2. That process repeated. After three, four times of failures, if finally became +0.....that is why."

"............But, from that point it can no longer decrease, so he can try for a +5 again....."

As those words left her mouth, Asuna seemed to realize the point that I was trying to get across, as her hazel eyes deep within the hood widened.

"I see..... «Maximum attempts at enhancing» huh. The upper limit of Anneal Blade, should be....."

"Eight times. In other words, four successes and four failures would use it up. So that sword can no longer be enhanced any more."

So ——— This is SAO, where the weapon enhancing system was terrible.

In this world, the number of times an equipment could be enhanced, «Maximum attempts at enhancing» property has been set. This was not «Maximum possible value of enhancing». That value determined how many times you could attempt enhancing it. For example, my initial equipment «Small Sword» had a limit of one, so if we attempted to enhance it and failed, that sword could never be a +1 after that.

What was worse was, the success rate of enhancing, could be manipulated to some extent by the owner' efforts. Of course, that includes finding a skilled blacksmith (ultimately one could master their own forging skills and do it themselves, but this was unrealistic at the present time), and if the necessary material items needed for enhancing gathered were of extravagant and of high quality and quantity, this would further increase the chances of success.

Typically, blacksmith players would set the success rate of enhancing to around seventy percent for their requested fee. If the requester wanted more, they would have to pay an additional fee for a larger quantity of items, or hunt the items themselves.

Therefore, if there was a point to blame the three-horned man, it would be his hotheadedness in continuing to request enhancing the failed items. If he had taken some time to calm down with a deep breath after the first failure, he should have paid more or came back later. That way, the valuable Anneal Blade would have avoided the tragedy of becoming +0 while using up all the attempts.

".....That's right. Well..... Indeed, I understood a little bit of that frantic feeling. Just a little."

I nodded as I agreed with Asuna's comment, and gave a moment of silence for that pitiful sword. The voice of the man who was still continuing to yell as usual was interrupted. It seems two of his friends had apparently rushed in. They each placed a hand on his shoulders, and tried hard to calm him down.

".....There, there, It'll be fine, Ryufior. I'll help you do the Anneal Blade quest again today."

"If we can work hard for it for a week, let's aim for a +8 this time."

*.....Oh, now it takes a week for three people to do it. Fortunately I did it early.*

So, with this realistic thought,

*.....You, cherish those friends of yours. And next time, don't gamble at enhancing recklessly.*

I looked at them with an emotional feeling, the three horned renamed to Ryufior-shi also regained his composure, and left the square as he walked away with slumped shoulders.

Behind him, the blacksmith who had endured the scolding quietly all this while timidly said something.

"That.....I'm really, really sorry for that. Next time, I will really, really try my best.....ah, again, you can ask me to do it again although you might hate me....."

Ryufior, who was walking, stopped and turned to face the blacksmith, and said in a suddenly changed voice.

".....It's not your fault.....I said various things aloud, that was bad of me."

"No..... that is also within my job scope....."

With his hands clasped in front of his leather apron, the blacksmith lowered his head, he looked as though he was very youthful, in his teens. With thin, drooping eyes coupled with casual hair that was separated down the middle, like that, he gave off a legitimate «Production Character» impression. If he had a smaller and stouter build, he would look like a member of the «Dwarf» race.....No, since he has no beard it would probably be a «Gnome».

While I thought about this and looked at their interaction, the blacksmith stepped forward and bowed deeply again, and said.

"Um, although I don't think it is a good apology.....that, +0 end Anneal blade which was my fault, if it's alright with you, perhaps you could let me buy it for eight thousand coll....."

*Zuwa*..... the surrounding onlookers caused a stir, and from my throat "ooh" leaked out.

At the current market rate, the obtainable through quest reward only clean Anneal Blade +0 is worth sixteen thousand coll. Eight thousand coll was half that much, and although Ryufior's blade had the same stats, the number of attempts had been exhausted and it was now an «End Product». It was now worth less than half the market value, perhaps about four thousand coll. It was an exceptional offer for an apology.

Ryufi-shi and his two friends were stunned and looked at each other, then all three nodded at the same time.

After the series of events ended, the three people, along with the onlookers, dispersed from the square, kan, kan, the rhythmic sound of a hammer began to start. The stall's dwarf..... I mean, blacksmith, began forging something on the anvil.

Asuna and I sat down on a bench on the opposite side of the circular square, vaguely listening to that sound.

Originally, I wasn't planning to stay so long in this square, I would have quickly finished my errands by now and escape from Urbus. There were two reasons my plans had changed. Because I encountered one of the few people in Aincrad's who did not call me a «Filthy Beater», allowing me to practice the use of the Japanese language. The other ―― was my original errand, which was, to enhance the Anneal Blade +6 that was on my back.

I overheard yesterday, while I was in Marome Village, that a reasonably skilled blacksmith player had appeared in Urbus' eastern square. I thought, that it was a good time to challenge +7, so I had carried the material items needed for enhancing it, then disguised myself and came back to Urbus, but this unexpected event had occurred first.

Actually, I could stand up from the bench and walked up to the blacksmith and say "Excuse me, I would like to enhance something," right now. As it was my first meeting with the Dwa.....no, young man, he certainly wouldn't say "I will not forge a beater's sword with my hammer."

However, earlier events had somewhat put pressure on me. The same Anneal Blade, had a set success rate of seventy percent, but +4 became +0. Statistically, it was possible, but it was no doubt a first class tragedy. If the same thing happened to me, I wouldn't go on a rampage, but would probably not leave my room for three days.

If I requested for enhancement in this mental state, how to put it..... It was rude towards Ryufior-shi's declining fortunes, and it felt like my sword would probably fail and become a +5. Then, I will go "Awawawawa" and challenge it again without any additional material, so it would fail once again and become +4. Naturally, there was no logical proof to that reasoning, «Net Game's Enhancement Gamble» could not be predicted by logic.....

".....So?"

I gazed blankly at the sudden voice next to me.

"Huh? What?"

".....Don't 'what' at me. Weren't you the one who asked me to sit here?"

Asuna glared at me.

"Eh, ah, tha-that's true. Sorry, I was thinking about something....."

"Thinking about something..... Kirito-kun, you came for that blacksmith's enhancement, didn't you?"

"Eh, ho-how did you know?"

As I was startled backwards, the rapier user gave an amazed look and said.

"When we met yesterday at Marome, you said you were going to the east of the rocky mountain area to hunt «Red Spotted Beetle». If so, you must have decided to collect material to enhance your one handed sword."

"O.....Oh."

I unintentionally gave out that sound.

".....What is with that reaction?"

"It's nothing.....it just doesn't seem like the words of a person who did not even know where the party member's name was displayed just four days ago.....ah, it-it isn't irony. I was just impressed."

"....."

My sincere words probably made her understand, as Asuna's facial expression subtly softened somewhat.

"It's because I've been learning various things lately."

She murmured. I was happy for some reason, and I nodded continuously as I talked.

"I see, um, that's a good thing. In the MMO world, without knowledge the results would be very different. If you want to know anything don't hesitate to ask, because I am a

former tester, I know everything up to the tenth floor, from the product's lineup to the mob's call....."

As I was carried away and talked up to this point, I realized that I committed a large mistake.

As I had said, I was a former tester, and at the same time, currently among the «Amassing and hoarding vast knowledge for their self interest, an evil Beater». On the first floor's boss raid battle, starting with the knight Diabel's friends, the high levelled players who hated and detested me were not few. Although I had disguised myself with leather armor and a bandanna, anyone who looked closely at my face would recognize me as Kirito, and the person talking and sitting on the same bench as me was Asuna, which would condemn her as a beater's friend. Chatting so unconcernedly in this busy place, was too careless of me.....

"Ah.....So-Sorry. I have something urgent to do, I just remembered."

As I tried to stand up with that lame excuse, my shoulders ――

The rapier user suddenly used the tip of her supple index finger to closely control me, and in a very small volume whispered to me.

".....You bear all the resentment and hate against all former testers by yourself, I think that's too excessive for you..... but because that is your decision, I did not say anything. But, you should respect my choice too. I don't care what other people think. I'll be your acqua.....friend then even if you don't like the appearance, I would not let you have said anything from the start anyway."

".....I lost. Everything.... had been predicted, huh."

Muttering, I lowered myself onto the bench once more.

My motive for becoming a beater in the first floor's boss room, and the reason for my attempt to escape a few seconds ago, had been guessed with zero percent error, making me emit a *gu* sound. Giving up, I raised my hands in surrender. Asuna gave a small smile from deep within the hood, and said.

"If you are Aincrad's pro, I am a girls school bred pro at psychological warfare. I can read you as easy as pie based on your avatar's expression."

"Th.....That is really easy to overlook....."

"Therefore, I think it's about time you taught me, the reason why you are hesitant to enhance your weapon. Actually, I came here today to ask that blacksmith-san to enhance my sword too."

"Eh....."

At her unexpected words, I gazed at the weapon which was suspended at Asuna's waist. Kept in an ivory sheath, the name of the rapier with the dark green guard was «Wind Fleuret». When we formed a party for the first floor's boss raid, she replaced her equipment, so her initial sword was replaced by this monster drop. It was actually a pretty rare item, if it was properly enhanced it had the potential to be used all the way to the third floor.

"That, should be +4 only?"

Asuna nodded at my question.

"You brought your own enhancement material? What type did you bring?"

"Let's see.....four «plank of steel», twelve «Needle of Wind Wasp»"

"Heh, you worked hard..... but....."

I mentally calculated the success rate, and groaned.

"Um, with this the success rate to get a +5 is around eighty percent."

"Is the risk not low enough?"

"Well, normally it would be so..... but after that show just now....."

I turned to glance at the opposite end of the square, where, rhythmically hammering away, was the dwarf.....-like blacksmith player. Asuna turned to look as well, then gave a light shrug.

"The probability of a thrown coin landing on any face, regardless of any previous outcome, is always fifty percent. The person just now tried and had a few failures in a row, and our attempts at enhancing our weapons should be unrelated, right?"

"That.....should be true....."

As I mumbled trying to enunciate a bad word that rolled around in my mouth, I gave it some thought. The rapier user Asuna is a person who used science and logic, while I was trying to convince her about "a gamble flow". Even for me, using my left brain's feeling of a «Bad Flow» wasn't a basis for an argument.

On the other hand, my right brain felt something. Whether it was my Anneal Blade or Asuna's Wind Fleuret, if we asked the blacksmith to enhance it here and now, even if we used materials to boost its probability of success, it would fail. Ignoring my intuition was not good, this was my personal rule, based on my experience of playing net games for many years.

"Hey, Asuna"

I turned my body to the right to face Asuna directly, using my most serious voice and expression and said.

"Wha.....What is it?"

"You'd like the success rate at ninety percent compared to eighty, right?"

".....That is true, of course"

"Compared to ninety percent, you'd like ninety five percent, right?"

".....That is true too, of course"

"Then, I think compromising is not good. Since there is a way to collect the material anyway, why not do our best to aim for ninety five percent."

"....."

The rapier user looked at me for a few seconds with a suspicious expression, then, as if she suddenly felt something, she slowly blinked with her long eyelashes, before saying.

"Yes, It is true that I don't like compromises. But I don't like people who move their mouths but not their hands just as much."

".....Eh?"

"Since you can talk up to this point, you must help me pursue perfection, Kirito-kun. Incidentally, the Wind Wasp's needle's drop rate is eight percent."

".....Eh?"

"Once you have decided, let's go to the hunting grounds. With two people, we should be able to hunt a hundred or so before dark."

".....Eh?"

While I gave off a dull face, Asuna slapped me on my shoulders, and stood up, before raising her eyebrows a little as she delivered the final blow.

"And, if you want to hunt with me as a combination, please remove that flashy bandanna. I'm really sorry, but it does not suit you at all."

# Afterword

Hello Everyone, I am Kunori Fumio/Kawahara Reki. Thanks for buying this book.

Isn't this incomplete!!!

I think anyone who read till this point would probably say this. I'm really sorry for not finishing.....orz. This «Rondo of the transient sword first chapter» is, as its name suggests, the first chapter, and will continue through the raid of the second floor to its completion.

Originally, I had planned for this story to be serialized on my homepage on new year's eve, and while making a book for COMITIA98, I couldn't think of a story until the end, and only could use the familiar Aincrad to escape. For this reason, I would like to offer two kinds of apologies for those who bought this book. This book's "first chapter" is scheduled to be published on my personal home page at the end of this year. I am really sorry.

This story, «~Rondo» is the direct sequel to my web serialization «Aria in the Starless night» this summer. Although it is merely a concept, I'm still thinking of writing the events of Asuna and Kirito's adventure, but as I thought to this point, If I had to write floor by floor, it would take a few years, no, tens of years to be able to finish writing it.....(Laughs). Before writing one must be prepared! But now that I've already started, thinking like that is useless, so I can only go for it. As long as everyone can endure it, I will definitely keep you company.

ME-09

# Monochrome Concerto

## first chapter

§ Aincrad 3rd Floor
14th December 2022

SWORD ART ONLINE

# ソードアートオンライン マテリアルエディション
# 9

SWORD ART ONLINE : MATERIAL EDITION 9

## Part 1

On the first floor of Aincrad, there was no theme, If we really had to say it, it would be «Everything is included». Grasslands, forests, the wilderness, the valley was rich in its variety of terrain. Outside of the main City, there were many small villages, the fantasy RPG had many exciting atmospheres to greet the players that arrived ―― but, under the conditions of a «Death Game», only a few people leisurely enjoyed this scenery.

Then came the second floor, which broke out of the fantasy kitchen sink and formed a theme. The entire floor was changed to a green grass covered layered mountains. The monsters that appeared were now animal based. Perhaps it was because the first floor was difficult, as the difficulty of the second floor did not increase, instead giving off a relaxed feeling, like that of a pasture. But a majority of players called it the «Cow's Floor». There should be no need to explain the reason for this.

And now ―― was the untainted, third floor.

As I climbed up the spiral staircase which linked the second floor's boss area to the third floor's main city, I talked to myself while clenching my right fist.

"In one sense, this can be considered where SAO really starts....."

Although this was just a line to set my mood, a voice whispered in return.

"Really? Why would you say that?"

Right after this question was asked, I scratched my head, and answered.

"Well..... from the third floor on, true humanoid mobs would start to appear. The first floor's Kobold and Taurus were only of the half human, «Demi-Human» class, capable of using simple sword skills, but its external appearance is that of a monster, right? However, from here on, there will be a lot of enemies whose external appearance is no different from a human's. If not for the color cursor, it would be completely impossible to distinguish them. Of course, they are able to hold conversations like NPCs, and their sword skills are also at a very high level. In other words....."

I turned my head, and looked over my shoulder to face the rapier user Asuna, and said.

"..... From this point on, is where the prologue of Sword Art Online ends. The man who locked us in here, Kayaba Akihito, had said in a SAO special edition magazine interview, '«Sword Art Online» is where swords and sword skills intertwine together, writing a melody of light and sound, a Concerto of life and death'....."

".....Oh....."

Even though she was listening to this sentence which had made me excited a year ago, Asuna didn't even look touched. She used her regular pace to climb the staircase, and gently shrugged, and said something I didn't expect.

"..... Since that interview, Kayaba had already planned this crime....."

"Ei.....aa, maaa, of course..... this should be the case."

On a day a month and a week ago, in front of the ten thousand players forced to gather in the central plaza, Kayaba had said this,

"To create and watch this world is the only reason I have created the Nerve Gear and SAO. And now, everything has been realized."

Supposing those words were true, even before Kayaba Akihito had planned SAO, before even outlining the Nerve Gear, he had planned this monstrous crime. Able to impress my young (more accurately, a year ago) heart, in the few interviews he gave, his words had two meanings. Facing me, who had just learnt that fact, Asuna said softly.

"A Concerto of.....life and death. Does this truly only refer to players crossing their swords and sword skills against humanoid monsters?"

"Eh..... What do you mean.....?"

I shrank my neck. Maintaining my posture of looking backward, as I climbed up the 'stairs between the the labyrinth area and the upper floor'. Because the design of this stairs were mostly the same, including during the beta test, I have climbed up these stairs around ten times. Only the relief on the black walls were different, which, upon closer inspection, implied the theme and landscape of the next floor, but I was too busy focusing on Asuna's body at the moment.

The rapier user's expression became more serious, and spoke to herself in a quiet voice.

"Perhaps I'm overthinking it..... This Concerto, is not actually music created by a pair of musical instruments. If it is played in pairs, the 'Duet' is more appropriate."

"Then..... the Concerto's, real meaning is.....?"

"As time passed by the meaning changed little by little, but basically it is the music of an orchestra, or many instruments accompanying the lead, a lone musical instrument.....In other words, it isn't one on one, but one against many, or should I say it's the music from a small group against a large one."

"One against.....many....."

I repeated the phrase I was pondering quietly, considering saying, "If it's like this, then isn't it comparable to a player against a group mob?" ——But, as I opened my mouth to say it, I closed it again.

In this world, a player against many, the scene of being in combat with, for example, ten or more monsters, was impossible. This is because, there was no destructive area of effect magic, and a ranged sword skill could only attack within the weapon's range, therefore, in SAO, being surrounded by monsters meant instant death.

Of course, the game design mirrored this fact, as most of the mobs were on their own, or at most two or three would appear at once. Unless they were intentionally brought together, or the player accidentally stepped on a trap, a situation where one player fought against many would never happen..... what's more, even if they did, they would be attempting to escape with all their might.

".....If this is the case, a Concerto like battle would never occur in this world. If you want to insist on it, it would be limited to the boss battle..... but, that would be a boss battle, meant for a raid group."

As Asuna looked at me who shrugged and gave a forced smile, she looked as though she wanted to say something, but did not open her mouth. After a beat, she broke out into a smile and nodded.

"Yes, maybe I'm overthinking it.....we shouldn't raise this topic right, Kirito-kun?"

"Eh? What?"

"......Nothing, it's already over."

After listening to this, my head which was still facing backwards, hit the top of the thick stone door.

"Ouch....."

Making a noise which people wouldn't think I was the type to make it, I waved my arms at the same time to prevent falling down due to a misstep, as I had climbed a stair that wasn't there. However, I did not regain my balance, and at this moment, rather than falling forward and hitting Asuna, why not fall backward?

At that moment, as I tried to lean on the door which had been unknowingly opened, I cried "Waaaa" as I went out of the large door, and beautifully fell down on the moss covered rock floor on my butt. This became the untainted floor's memorable first imprint.

Aincrad, Third Floor.

This floor's designed theme was «Forest». However, unlike the first floor's Horunka village's surroundings, and the southern region of the second floor's forest, the scale was completely different. This was because even the smallest tree had a trunk diameter of one meter and the shortest trees were thirty metres tall. Using large trees to describe them were inappropriate, as the ancient trees could be seen to stretch out to the skies without limits. The golden rays coming from between the overlapping leaves and branches illuminated the land, looking like a land of fantasy.

"Woah.....!"

Beside me, enduring the pain in my tailbone, Asuna cheered in a happy tone and rushed out of the door. I turned eighty degrees while still on the ground, as my eyes followed her figure. Asuna stopped in a place not too far away, and spun round and round under the slender rays of the sun, looking as though she was extremely fond of the scenery of this forest that seemed to extend out forever.

"This is great.....Just seeing this scenery makes me feel as though the hard work of climbing up here is not wasted."

The rapier user normally equipped with a hooded cape had her hood down, so the rays of the sun were reflected dazzlingly off her beautiful, glossy, long, smooth, thin, chestnut hair into my eyes. Her slim build, in addition to her cool beauty, made players think that she wasn't a player, but a fairy of the forest.

".....It truly is not wasted."

After quietly saying these words, I stood up. Taking off my leather coat, I lazily stretched. I have no idea whether it was an illusion or not, but the air was filled with a sweet scent. The essence of large numbers of plants.....perhaps this was the cause.

Glancing behind me, circled by the roots of a gigantic tree, was a stone structure. We had just climbed out of its black opening. The others raiders would probably come up here in about ten minutes.

".....Next....."

Although we were on the third floor ——— our actions from here on have yet to be determined. Of course, on a new floor we would still do things we did in the previous floor, which was to go to the main city to shop for items, get quests, and fight to increase our level. However, before that, I had a matter to confirm.

After deciding that, I moved to Asuna's side, and since she was still enjoying the scenery, gave off an initial light cough to alert her to my presence, and opened my mouth.

"Hey, I'm sorry to disturb your mood.,....."

".....? What?"

The rapier user gave me a rare smile, so I raised my right hand and extended my forefinger to guide her line of sight toward the north. Extending from the stone structure behind us was an ancient road, which had a Y junction in the middle of the path about twenty meters away.

"Going along the road to the right will quickly lead you to the main city. Going along the left is a forest that, after some time, will lead to this floor's first labyrinth."

".....Um"

"Generally speaking, we should head for the main city to activate the transition gate, but let's leave that task to Lynd's and Kibaou's group who are hot on our heels."

".....Um."

"The reason is, I don't want to meet them, as well as I have a quest I must complete in the forest to the left. However, both of these are personal reasons....."

At this point, the rapier user's smile gradually faded. Inversely, her pupils gave off a ray of dangerous light. From this point on, if I said the wrong thing, Asuna's mood would sour, and even though I could perceive this, I still couldn't work out a theory to avoid it.

".....So?"

At the urging of this grim voice, I continued while facing downward in fear and trepidation.

"...That... We probably need to resupply and maintain our weapons, if Asuna wants to aim for the main city, I think we can disband our party..... Of course, if you are willing to come with me to finish what I need to do in the forest, I don't.....mind....."

"Don't-wan-na, I didn't have the intention of not disbanding the party anyway. You and I are both solo players, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"However, the thing you just mentioned, should be «The one who finishes first gets an advantage» right? Then, I'll go with you, as I hate low efficiency. Of course, if you want to disband the party and throw me aside, monopolizing all the benefits for yourself, I can only agree with you."

"I-I wouldn't dare, I never thought of monopolizing, not even a little. In fact, more people would be more efficient."

"In that case let's hurry along. It won't matter if we resupply and maintain our equipment later."

"Yes, ok."

The rapier user turned, and made a patapata sound as she started to walk, I followed to catch up to her back, feeling in my heart a mysterious «Barely passed» feeling . I didn't even understand the requirements to «Pass»

Really, If I knew this would happen, I would have had more interaction with the girls in my class..... as I thought until this point, I snorted in denial. If I had such an ability during middle school, I would not have snuck into SAO five seconds after the game's official launch. In other words, this kind of situation, walking together with a temperamental rapier user, would not occur, I reasoned.

—— Having said that, I suddenly had this thought.

Thinking back about the past month being imprisoned in this game, In order to survive.....that is, to continuously rush and strengthen myself, have I ever regretted being in this VRMMO called SAO?

Most people would regret it, not regretting it was an abnormal ability. However, no matter how I searched my past own feelings, although I easily found fear and homesickness, I couldn't find regret.

Perhaps I was an abnormal person, or perhaps I was in so grim a situation that there was no time for remorse. If the latter was the case, the cause of this state was without a doubt the valiant rapier user walking three meters in front of me. It was because this sword user always made a racket that I am able to feel regret, as all the other negative emotions were pushed to the back of my mind.....

—— No-no-no, even in my mind I wouldn't thank her.

Having determined this resolutely, I increased my pace to catch up to my party member, and walked by her side.

## Part 2

Based on my beta testing experience, after players defeated the floor boss, going up the stairs onto a new floor and into a new district, within the thirty minutes for activating the transition gate, the monster POP was controlled to a low value.

It was probably like this in order for the players who had come up to the new floor just after being worn out from fighting the boss to not be exterminated by the small fry mob, but unfortunately this grace was only limited to the nearby surroundings of the city.

Just after walking along the forest trail for five minutes, we had to increase our pace in order to keep up with our enemies' searching ability. I could feel the changes to the surrounding air. The happifying and beautiful fantasy forest, step by step changed into a cold and hostile «outsider» feeling.

"Asuna, the enemy spawning here has strength similar to those guys on the second floor labyrinth. Because a majority of them are animal and plant based monsters, they will not use sword skills."

After listening to my words, the rapier user silently nodded.

"However, based on the mobs general prewritten battle movements, they will unceasingly bring us deeper into the forest. Once the monsters spot any mistakes we make, they will launch ambushes, and even if we defeat it successfully, we may end up lost."

"However, as long as we look at the map, we should be able to find our way out, right?"

"About that....."

I swung my right hand forward, and quickly opened the map window, hastily inputting commands to switch it to public viewing mode, and then showed it to Asuna.

"Ah.....The color is very faint."

Exactly as she said, the majority of the map appeared like misty ash, and according to the general situation, the places which we have explored would emerge in a 3D view, however, because the map for this place was extremely faded, even if we were very attentive we could not see the path.

"This region is called the «Misty Forest», the map colour becomes faint in addition to the strong fog, which will really cause people to get lost. Therefore, even if we're in the middle of battle you absolutely must not leave your party or the path. This point is very important."

"Understood. .....Then you should quickly show me a demonstration."

"Eh?"

"What, just look clearly. Right behind you."

At the end of her words, I gingerly looked behind, and just a little off the forest's stone path..... Lets just say a withered tree grew there. Its pale yellow trunk had a diameter of fifteen centimeters, and it was only two meters high, much smaller than the trees which surrounded it. However, situated at the side of the three trunk were two holes close together, emitting a light like that of eyes. To its left and right were claw like branches swaying constantly.

Although the dead tree and I only crossed eyes for a split second, its roots on its right side began emitting a creaking sound, as it left the floor, taking a step forward. It was followed by the roots on its left. As it moved forward swaying unstably, it suddenly changed into a sprint. A third hole opened beneath the other two, and from it a "Moroooooo!" roar was issued.

The withered tree changed into the plant type mob «Treant Sapling», possessing many special abilities, one of which was, while embedded in the ground, a player's enemy searching ability would not get a reaction from it. It looks like the Treant had walked next to me while I was lost in thought giving the explanation.

Must not be careless! I told myself, at the same time my right hand reached to the back and pulled out my «Anneal Blade+7», making a loud sound.

As the branches to the left and right were cut, and it's opened mouth was drilled by Asuna's «Wind Fleuret+5», the Treant gave a "Moroooo!" sorrowful cry as it turned into powder. The battle only lasted three minutes.

Asuna and I gently bumped our left fists to celebrate our victory, sheathing our swords at the same time. Although we were careful, the Treant's «Changing the body's front and back direction» skill was meant to confuse us, and we had moved five meters away from the path of the forest. At this degree it was still easy to go back to the path. In heavier mist, leaving ten meters from the path would be trouble.

While moving along the trail, Asuna said.

"I keep getting..... an extremely evil feeling"

"Eh?"

"Because, that ghost tree just now, it was a still growing sapling, right? Chopping it down makes me feel not environmentally friendly"

"This, like this, well, this is so.....but, I think if anyone who has seen the «Elder Treant» monster, will think "Must destroy it while it is in the sapling stage"."

"......There is no need to talk like that. One Kibaou is enough."

As we were joking away, we returned to the path, and heaved a long sigh. The golden rays that came from the roof of our heads came down at a greatly changed angle, it looks like night was falling soon.

"......Continue. What did we come to this area to do....."

"To do.....I say, that. It's what Kirito-kun said earlier, "I have a quest I must complete."."

"It's that. That said, It was only possible for a quest..... the quest starting NPC is in a random place. Asuna, are you confident in your ears?"

As I said this, I calmly looked away, as if nothing happened in the past, and saw the rapier user cover her cherry red ears with her hands and retreating a step back for some reason..

"......Kirito-kun, do you have an interest in that aspect? Do you have an ear fetish?"

"Ce-ce-certainly not! In this situation, I am obviously not talking about the shape, but the hearing ability....."

"I'm just joking. Besides, it doesn't matter how good our hearing is. We are not even listening to the sound using the vibration of the membranes, its just the stimulation of the brain."

".....I see, it's like this. Then let's look for it together. If we rely on our hearing ability it will be a lot easier....."

I straightened my back, despite knowing that it made little sense, I still put my hands behind my ear, and Asuna imitated me, saying,

"Looking together is fine, but what kind of sound is it? Don't tell me it's the sound of leaves dropping."

"Of course I won't. It's not a natural sound, but a metallic noise.....More specifically, the sound of swords colliding with each other."

At these words, Asuna gave a dubious look, but quickly said "understood".

Standing in the center of the path, Asuna and I put our backs together, using a total of four ears to launch an all around search. Generally speaking, the community would miss it, but because this was the virtual reality, there were various skills in existence to detect various noises in the surroundings. The chirping of the wind, the leaves rubbing together, an animal's footsteps behind us, the call of the birds..... I took all these noises and filtered them out of my mind, looking for the stiff quality of a man made noise.....

"...........!"

Asuna and I who were leaning on each other, trembled at the same time. I faced right, while Asuna turned to the left, to look in the same direction.....the south-west direction. Although it was quite subtle, there were indeed sounds of sword skills coming from that direction.

"Let's go."

Asuna pulled on my coat as I walked a step forward.

"But, I thought we shouldn't go into the forest?"

"No problems, as long as you accept the quest you can return to the road."

".....And if you don't accept?"

"It's really not a problem, camping equipments are already laid out! Let's hurry!"

Advancing toward our target within the forest at a high speed, I head a "Yaa.....!" reminiscing sound, but it was quickly covered by the footsteps behind me.

Leaving the stone path, I ignored the moss covering the earth surface which gave off a relaxing sensation to the soles of my feet. Avoiding the gigantic trees' dry branches, we dashed towards the source of the noise. If we encountered a mob it would be very troublesome, so I took advantage of my mob searching ability to look for color cursors. Finding a Treant growing out of the ground was difficult, but fortunately I didn't encounter one.

After five minutes, the steel sounds became louder, and accompanying the fencing sounds at the same time were yells. In the center of our view, two NPC cursors appeared, and then I saw the reflected light effect off a tree trunk.

Going around that tree would allow us to reach the battlefield we were aiming for ——— at this time I stopped my feet, and stretched out my right hand to stop Asuna. I made a gesture with my index finger to tell her to be quiet, then the two of us hid together behind a tree trunk, sneaking peeks past the edge of the tree, at the battlefield.

In a slightly larger clearing, two silhouettes were in a fierce battle.

One of them was a tall male with shining gold and green armor. In his right hand was a long sword, while his left held a round shield, and at a glance you would know that they were high grade goods. The hair on his head was a beautiful platinum, and his external appearance made one think of a handsome Scandinavian actor from Hollywood.

The other person, had armor which was in a contrast to the first, as it was purple and black. The somewhat curved saber and small kite shield used were both of a gloomy dark colour, but their quality was just as good as the first person's. The short dark purple hair, and dark skinned face appeared to possess a high level of good looks. Beautiful red lips and a slightly bulging bosom indicated that that this black swordsman was female.

"Haa!"

The platinum haired male gave a fierce roar, at the same time swinging down the sword in his right hand.

"Yaa!"

The purple haired female countered with her saber. *Clang* a crisp metallic sound resounded, and created a bright light that illuminated the dark forest.

".....Are, are these really NPCs.....?"

Underneath me, Asuna did not dare to believe those words. I understood her feelings. Their bodies' movements and vivid expressions completely did not look as though they were controlled by a system, like a soulless virtual body. However ——

"Look at their ears."

"Ei.....Ah! Both of them .....sharp. This is....."

"The male is a «Forest Elf», while the female is a «Dark Elf». One more thing, look at the top of their heads."

At his words, Asuna's line of sight was drawn slightly upward. She once again gave off an "ah" sound.

Both of the fiercely battling warriors had a «!» sign above their heads. It was the proof that they were the starting point of an NPC quest. Normally, if you get close to them and speak, the quest would start immediately. However ——

"Both of them have a quest, and they are both still fighting, what is the problem here?"

"To put it briefly, you can only accept one quest. —— I leave this important decision to you, Asuna."

At my words, the rapier user's line of sight left the Elves, as she raised her head to look at me.

"Decision.....?"

"Yup. The quest they give, is not a single nor consecutive type of quest. It is the first of a large scale mission-type quest. It will start from this floor until the ninth floor"

"Ninth....."

Ninth Floor!? Asuna quickly covered her mouth before saying these words, but her hazel eyes were enlarged in surprise. Looking at her like this, I became very happy, and added even more astonishing information.

"In addition to that, if you made a mistake you are not allowed to restart. Of course, you can't take the opposite route either. The route chosen here, must be continued until the ninth floor."

"I say.....you should have told me of this matter earlier....."

The angry expression Asuna had, suddenly gave way to a suspicious one.

".....Opposing routes? In other words, those two Elves....."

"I see. Who to help, and who to fight. Black or white, which do you choose?"

Listening to the question I raised, for some reason Asuna stared at me.

".....This, there's no alternative option right? It's fine in an ordinary game, but we are currently in SAO. It's not like you can't go along the route you went along as a beta tester. That .....I, have complete confidence in whatever your choice is."

Uuu. It was my turn to fall silent. Asuna's eyes became indifferent, and she used a resolute tone to assert.

"——The lady Dark Elf . Didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, I do い、イエスアイドゥー[1].....But, but not because she was a girl, but because she was dark skinned."

——An excuse like that should not have worked, and I only saw Asuna standing still, her head was turned to a side.

"Maa, this is fine. I didn't want to join the male to cut down the female one anyway. Let's join the black elf and defeat the white one. Let's go."

After speaking these words very quickly, Asuna got ready to get out of her hiding spot, and I quickly held on to her hood.

"Wait, wait. There is another important thing."

"Which is?"

"That is.... How to say, even if you chose to aid the black side, we can't defeat the white Elf, regretfully."

"Eh.....Eeeeh!?"

In order to keep the wide eyed Asuna calm, I rested my hand on her slender shoulders before continuing.

"I can see from their valiant equipment, the white Elf is a Forest Elf, the black Elf is a Dark Elf, and they are originally from the seventh floor, and are in fact the elite mob there. No matter what methods to ensure our safety while we fight, they are not opponents that people like us who just came to the third floor can handle."

"Th-Then.....What should we do? After all.....If we die....."

"Relax, even if we lose we don't die. When our HP gauge is reduced to half, we can join her party and she will use powerful skills, that will be the time we can overpower the opponent. What we have to do is, don't panic as we defend as much as possible, and wait for assistance. The greatest danger is if we panic and escape, as the other monsters would be drawn out and cause trouble."

".....I understand."

"Good."

I pat Asuna on her back, then removed my hand.

"Then, dash out when I count to three. The quest will start by itself once we are close, so you just need to stay beside me."

The rapier user nodded as she walked to my side, and when I counted down starting from three, in my heart I gave a brief apology.

Actually, I had left out some information which I didn't tell Asuna. Which was, the one we were preparing to assist .....the Dark Elf lady named «Kizmer», in order to help us

to suppress the Forest Elf, after using her forbidden skill, she would sacrifice herself to take down her enemy along with her. Even if we took the other path, which was to join the Forest Elf to fight the Dark Elf, the end result was the same. No matter which path we chose, these two Elves would die here, and will soon be followed by a long military campaign.....No, it was a story about to unfold.

".....Two, One, Zero!"

As I finished counting down aloud, Asuna and I flew out to the open space. The two elves in battle both looked at us at the same time, and fiercely jumped back to put some distance between them. At the same time, the «!» sign on both of their heads turned into «?».

"What are you humans doing in this forest?" the Forest Elf said.

"Don't come here and disturb us! leave us immediately!" These words were said by miss Dark Elf.

Of course, we could also leave at this time. But then the quest would not begin. Asuna and I exchanged glances, then unsheathed our swords together —— and pointed the tip at the shiny breastplate belonging to the Forest Elf.

The handsome face gradually grew fierce. The NPC's yellow cursor, began to flicker and was on the verge of becoming red.

"You're incredibly stupid..... you want to join the Dark Elves, so you want to become the rust on my blade?"

"Yes....."

"Yes, but the one to disappear is this DV guy!"

After saying out his resolute lines, in front of me, who did not know why he referred to me as DV, the Forest Elf's cursor changed. From light yellow —— it became a bright red. Woah real strong, and at this moment, a beautiful and ruthless smile emerged on his handsome face.

"All right, then I shall destroy you, human."

Shalaa! I concentrated to position my long sword, and at the same time told Asuna,

"That's good, focus on defence."

—— Although this was the case, we still needed to hold out for three minutes. I added in my heart, from the side of Asuna's face, I saw a certain expression, and the disturbing feeling vanished. Because this expression —— only the rapier user Asuna in a serious mode would come up with it, I found this out after having went adventuring with her a few times.

"That, defence..... focus....."

"I got it."

She whispered this, but her actions were the opposite, the rapier in the rapier user's right hand suddenly gave off a fierce ray of light.

Twenty minutes later

"H.....How is this possible....."

Leaving this words, the Forest Elf fell with a *pa* on the floor, and as I continued to look at the situation before my eyes, I said the same thing.

"H.....How is this possible....."

No matter how many times we checked the enemy's HP gauge, it was truly at zero. Opposite him, Asuna and I had both lost half our HP, entering the yellow zone. During the beta period, a four man party including me fought the Forest Elf, but we were defeated in two minutes.

".....What, as long as you put your mind to it, you can do it!"

At these words I turned my head, and an extremely tired looking yet straight backed and hands aloft Asuna's eyes finally met mine. Then our eyes shifted about a meter to the left. Standing there and holding a black saber, was the Black Elf looking at the floor.

Miss, isn't it time you died, this unclear line came to my mind. Looking at the Dark Elf knight Kizmer, I saw her slowly raise her head, looking at me.

Her agate eyes was full of surprise and doubt, the expression in her eyes seemed as though it was asking me, "What am I supposed to do now?". However, this should be my imagination.

I hope that it is my imagination.

(To be continued)

## Afterword

Good day everyone, I am Kunori Fumio. Thanks for reading «Material Edition 9».

This doujinshi contains the first chapter of «Sword Art Online Third floor raid». However.....in January 2012, the first part of «Second floor raid chapters» had ended, and the second floor's boss name did not even appear.....(sweat). regarding those reading the serialized series, you might feel there is an error with regards to the timing, but you can read this story independently. If this thin and small less than thirty pages book is able to bring joy to all of you, then I am really honoured.

This year there is an important matter, which is «Sword Art Online» and «Accel world» is going to be animated and shown on television. I will put great effort in every aspect (of course including my colleagues), so I hope that everyone can support these two works as well!

**Copyright records**

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# References

1. ↥ Asuna's question "didn't you?" is written in English in the Japanese light novel while Kirito's answer is written in Katakana although it's also in English (with a grammar mistake). It might be hinting that Asuna is fluent in English while Kirito isn't.
2. ↥ VRMMO-RPG - Virtual Reality Massively Multiplayer Online - Role Playing Game
3. ↥ Progressers - "**攻略組**", or "capture/clearing group". "Clearing" as in "clearing a game". The author used the term directly in English/katakana, hence its usage instead of "clearing group", which is more commonly used.
4. ↥ WWFM - "**風林火山**", Fuurinkazan's abbreviated name. Likely Wind (Fuu), Woods (Rin), Fire (Ka), Mountain (Zan). "As swift as the wind, as quiet as the forest, as daring as fire, and immoveable as the mountain."
5. ↥ NPC - Non-Player Character. A character not controlled by a player.
6. ↥ First Strike Mode - A duel mode in SAO, where the first person to land a proper hit is the victor.
7. ↥ "I'll parry both sides in one motion" - The original line used "one-action double-parry" as furigana. As far as I know, there isn't really any such term in fencing (or anywhere else for that matter).
8. ↥ Flag - A term originating from computing, for values with possible true/false options. Used here to refer to a set of variables to bring about a certain scenario.
9. ↥ Ruru's Lullaby –

| Romanised version: | Original: |
|---|---|
| minami kara kita tabigeinin | 南からきた旅芸人 |
| ryu-to katate no tabigeinin | リュート片手の旅芸人 |
| gin no ito wo hito nadesureba | 銀の糸をひと撫ですれば |
| poronporori nemuri ni sasoi | ぽろんぽろりん眠りに誘い |
| nagai ohige no sonchou-san mo | 長いおひげの村長さんも |
| gametsui bukiya no ojisan mo | がめつい武器屋のおじさんも |
| hiroba de kakeru kodomora mo | 広場で駆ける子供らも |
| yane ni nobotta kuroneko mo | 屋根に登った黒猫も |
| koeda de utau komatori mo | 小枝で唄うこま鳥も |
| tetsu no yoroi no orochi mo | 鉄の鎧の大蛇も |
| torontororin minna nemuru | とろんとろりん皆眠り・・・ |

10. ↥ JST – Japan Standard Time.
11. ↥ First Seventh Day – Shonanoka. The seventh day memorial service, part of funeral customs in Japan. Depending on the region, it may refer to either the seventh day from the death of the deceased, or the seventh day from the start of the funeral service.
12. ↥ VR - Virtual Reality.